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THE INTERNATIONAL FILM MAGAZINE

Sight & Sound

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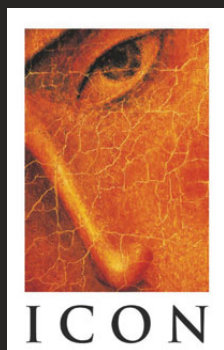
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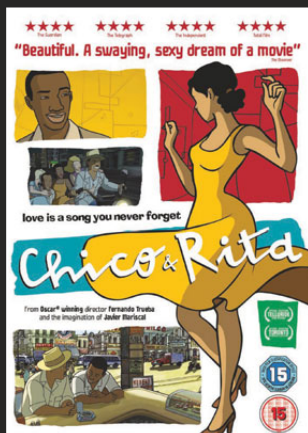
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Photography by Levon Biss/
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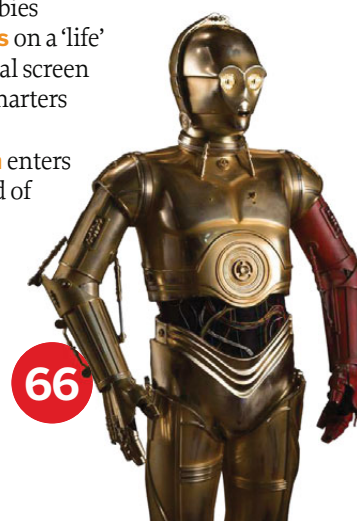
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Editorial Nick James



MANUFACTURING CONSENSUS

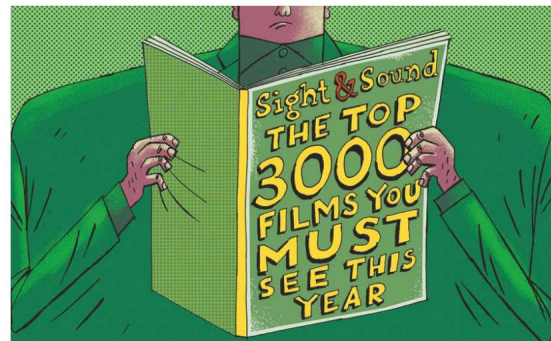
Regular readers may have noticed that I've been using the word consensus a lot lately, particularly in the context of 'Films of the Year' polls. I have argued that it's been harder to get a widely shared agreement on more than one or two outstanding films a year pretty much ever since the arrival of video in the 1980s. More recently, the wildly increasing number of films being released in cinemas (albeit many of them only for a day or two, just to qualify for newspaper reviews) has exacerbated the problem. With so many reviewers feeling the need to distinguish themselves by championing little-known films, critical advocacy seems as thinly spread across film releases as is the audience.

Meanwhile, things have gotten so bad for foreign-language cinema exhibition in the UK that a Cold War acronym comes to mind: MAD – Mutual Assured Destruction. My reaching for apocalyptic terms is prompted by Charles Gant's end-of-year round-up Numbers column (see page 15), which points out that in box-office terms 2015 was a year of "crushing disappointment" for foreign-language film: "In both 2007 and 2008 five non-Hindi foreign-language films each achieved £1 million at the UK box office. In 2013 (*The Great Beauty*) and 2014 (*The Raid 2*) it was one apiece. This year... there are none. But it's worse. In 2013, nine non-Hindi foreign-language films managed £300,000 or more. In 2014, six did. In 2015, only three crossed the line: *Wild Tales*, *Force Majeure* and *Timbuktu*."

Charles quotes Curzon Artificial Eye's Louisa Dent, who talks about looking to films that give the audience "something more", and she's right that cinema distributors have never been in a more competitive environment. People have plenty else to do with their free time. But for me it's not just about audiences being more picky across different media, it's also that – even when non-blockbuster cinema is their main interest – filmgoers have too many release titles to choose between. It's an over-saturated market.

There's a vicious circle here. Audience and critics alike buy into the cinematic smorgasbord, and distributors respond by buying and trying to distribute more films than ever. From the point of view of anyone who thinks non-anglophone cinema is important, this is MAD, because it will lead to the point where all foreign-language cinema becomes unexhibitable. Indeed, bearing in mind that European

Critics should be more picky about which foreign-language films they champion – particularly when they're writing from film festivals, where reviews influence what distributors buy



directors such as Paolo Sorrentino, Yorgos Lanthimos and Olivier Assayas are already making their films in English, we may be very close to that point.

As Dent points out, this has something to do with the loss of critics' persuasive power. That loss has come about in part because of two tendencies of which *Sight & Sound* is often guilty. The first is the kind of critical nod-through given to any film by an auteur of reputation, even if it is weak; the second is simply that critics in the current climate recommend far too much.

But wait, you might think, surely *S&S* is exactly the kind of magazine that wants to honour great reputations and encourage a thousand flowers to bloom. That's true, we do, and no one enjoys more than our editorial team the trawl through the literally hundreds of titles that got just one vote in our end-of-year poll. But by being too generous and inclusive, critics are aiding the processes by which even French cinema, once so successful in the UK, struggles to find an audience.

So, no matter how naive and quixotic a request it may seem in the face of market forces, I really am suggesting that critics should contrive to be more picky about which foreign-language films they champion – particularly when they're writing from film festivals, where reviews have some influence, however minor, on what distributors buy.

There are caveats. It may be that this has been a bad year for foreign-language films, that not many of the name directors who are usually a shoo-in at Cannes put a film out. Still, we have a responsibility to make our choices more effective where we can. The alternative is to stand by and see the insularity and xenophobia that are drawn out by campaigns against immigrants and in favour of British withdrawal from the EU mirrored by a near-total absence of films not in English or Hindi. We can already blame the television broadcasters for abandoning foreign-language film – a shameful neglect that began decades ago. Critics must do their best to help our cinemas not to become similarly bereft, and that may mean restraining their desire to embrace too much. ☹

IN THE FRAME

LIFE DURING WARTIME



Sheltered upbringing: Greer Garson, Walter Pidgeon and family endure an air raid in *Mrs. Miniver* (1942)

During World War II, stirring films about plucky civilians pulling together and making do were among Britain's secret weapons

By Pamela Hutchinson

At the outbreak of World War II, British cinemas fell dark. Mass gatherings in closed halls were deemed a safety risk and popular entertainment a non-essential effort. Before long, that decision was reversed and the popularity of a trip to the flicks boomed, with British cinemagoers buying 25 to 30 million tickets a week throughout the war.

First and foremost, the movies provided welcome escapism for Brits suffering on the home front. As the young lovers in the Hollywood drama *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) agree, war may not be a time for frivolity, but it's a terrible time to lose your sense of humour. But, just like everything else, films began to play their part in the war effort: boosting morale, helping audiences to understand the sacrifices demanded of them and, via blatant propaganda, winning the nation's support for government strategy. A new programme of screenings, restorations and releases from the BFI revisits these years when the cinema became vital to the national spirit.

Between the B movie and the main feature, the predominantly female cinema audience would be subjected to a lecture. Shorts from the Ministry of Information taught housewives ingenious ways to stretch their rations and support the troops, from recycling scrap to digging for victory and turning cabbages and root vegetables into nutritious family meals. Popular comedians such as Tommy Trinder were wheeled out to dramatise the wisdom of saving (*Save Your Shillings and Smile*, 1943), while the experimental painter and filmmaker Len Lye applied his avant-garde skills to a short hymn to ration-book cuisine (*When the Pie was Opened*, 1941).

While from this distance the films appear quirky and often charming, wartime women, who knew very well the cost of a boil wash, tended to roll their eyes at these paeans to making do and mending, with seats tipping up at the start of a well-meaning 'Food Flash' ('Boning a herring is easy') or an upper-class male monologue in praise of the potato. For

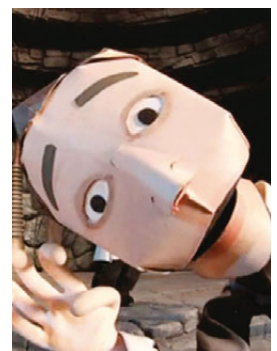
Slapstick Festival

The celebration of vintage and silent film comedy returns to venues across Bristol from 20-25 January. Highlights include a talk by comedian Lucy Porter on scriptwriter Anita Loos (right), a focus on comedy westerns and a host of films featuring slapstick staples from Chaplin and Cary Grant to Shaun the Sheep.



Glasgow Film Festival

Over the last 12 years the festival has gained a reputation for its adventurous programming and use of surprising venues. This year (17-28 February) promises the same and more, with 'The Man Who Fell to Earth' at Glasgow Planetarium, a strand exploring Hollywood double-acts and a sidebar on contemporary Argentinian cinema. The full programme is still to be announced, but look out for Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson's *Anomalisa* (right).



ON OUR
RADAR



Keeping the wheels turning: Anne Crawford and Patricia Roc in *Millions Like Us* (1943)

those of us lucky enough not to know the taste of powdered egg, a selection of the best of these films has been digitised and gathered on a forthcoming BFI DVD, *Ration Books and Rabbit Pies: Films from the Home Front*. More will also be made available on the BFI Player and, for the authentic 1940s experience, many of these shorts will play in matinee programmes with popular wartime features as part of a BFI Southbank season called 'Blitz Flicks'.


Which brings us back to *Mrs. Miniver*, the multiple Oscar-winning film starring Greer Garson. In this adaptation of a popular newspaper column, Mrs Miniver's life in an idyllic English village is transformed by war – the film makes sure to stress that these once "happy, careless people" prove their mettle under pressure. Garson exemplifies the stoic home-front heroine, facing down an escaped German pilot ("Yeah, he had a gun") and soothing her terrified children during an air raid by reading *Alice in Wonderland* to them in the shelter.


In the British film *Millions Like Us* (1943), Patricia Roc plays Celia, a young woman slowly drawn into the war effort, first by the romantic lure of meeting men in uniform.

At the close of the film, bereaved but singing along to a popular tune with her fellow munitions workers, she becomes truly part of a collective, committed to the cause.

Another British film from the era, also forthcoming on BFI DVD and Blu-ray, *Love on the Dole* (1941), may have been set a decade earlier, but its evocation of a life confined by austerity resonated with its wartime audience. For Deborah Kerr as Sally, "Things that are beautiful seem out of reach", and her destitute brother longs to prove he could be a hero too in another war.

These favourites will be joined in the season by others including Will Hay's romp *The Goose Steps Out* (1942), Humphrey Jennings's countrywide collage *Listen to Britain* (1942) and a recently rediscovered film starring Peggy Cummins, *Welcome Mr. Washington* (1944), in which a village is thrown into havoc by an influx of GIs.

The rationale for these films becoming wartime hits is clear on paper, but their appeal has hardly diminished. Rabbit pie may be an acquired taste, but these stories of humble heroism appeal to a very British, enduring sensibility. 

 **The 'Blitz Flicks' season runs at BFI Southbank, London, throughout January**

LISTOMANIA COAL-MINING FILMS

With Hollywood retelling the Chilean mining rescue on screen in *The 33*, we dig into cinema history for some more underground gems

- 1 **The Proud Valley** (1940, below)
Pen Tennyson
- 2 **How Green Was My Valley** (1941)
John Ford
- 3 **The Silent Village** (1943)
Humphrey Jennings
- 4 **Salt of the Earth** (1953)
Herbert J. Biberman
- 5 **Harlan County U.S.A.** (1976)
Barbara Kopple
- 6 **Matewan** (1987)
John Sayles
- 7 **Germinal** (1993)
Claude Berri
- 8 **Zoölender** (2001)
Ben Stiller
- 9 **Blind Shaft** (2003)
Li Yang
- 10 **The Miners' Hymns** (2010)
Bill Morrison



QUOTE OF THE MONTH VERONICA LAKE

'Hollywood gives a young girl the aura of one giant, self-contained orgy farm, its inhabitants dedicated to crawling into every pair of pants they can find.'



'Vertigo Sea'

One of the highlights of last year's Venice Biennale was John Akomfrah's 'Vertigo Sea' (right), a three-screen meditation on the sea and its role in the history of slavery, migration and conflict. It is showing at the Arnolfini, Bristol, from 16 January – 10 April, before touring galleries across the UK. Akomfrah also has a solo exhibition of new and old films at the Lisson Gallery, London, from 22 January – 12 March.



'Hail, Caesar!'

The Coen brothers' all-star caper about a fixer (Josh Brolin, right) in 1950s Hollywood looks to be one of early 2016's most exciting offerings. It's due in UK cinemas on 26 February, but for those who can't wait, there's a season of films by one of the Coens' old Hollywood heroes, Preston Sturges, including classics such as 'Sullivan's Travels' and 'The Lady Eve', at BFI Southbank, London, from 1 February – 16 March.



TAKE SHELTER



Rain or shine: (clockwise from top left) *The Avengers* (1961-69), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Une femme est une femme* (1961) and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964)

Whether as signifiers of maternal care or tools of male violence, umbrellas in films are far more than just a shield against the elements



By Hannah McGill

With its structure at once full and fragile, and its protective, somewhat fussy function, the umbrella tends to carry feminine associations

in cinema: it signals the indefatigable practicality and enveloping love of the title character in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Geneviève's vulnerability and practical need for male protection in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), and the flyaway sexiness and burgeoning maternal potential of Angela in *Une femme est une femme* (1961). Angela is introduced carrying a bright red umbrella, a scarlet blot which is echoed by the diagrams of wombs in the maternity magazine she pauses to peruse and the neon red circle she passes under as she enters the strip joint where she works. When it appears to start raining as she walks down the street, Angela

makes as if to open her umbrella, but does not do so: she wants to be unprotected, a foreshadowing of her coming efforts to get pregnant.

The transparent umbrella carried by Charlotte in *Lost in Translation* (2003) is part of Sofia Coppola's ongoing campaign to elevate the flimsy, disposable accoutrements of girlhood to the poetic realm, but it also represents her protagonist's particular emotional condition. As her marriage unravels, Charlotte is enclosed, yet exposed; observing the world at a remove; oddly protected by her pain. This type of umbrella is also particularly cheap and popular in Japan, and so serves to emphasise Charlotte's cultural displacement – itself a metaphor for the mingled misery and liberation of finding oneself unloved. The converse state is celebrated in *Singin' in the Rain* (1951), when Don Lockwood expresses his blissful oneness with a world that has provided him with love by using his umbrella as a dance partner rather than a shield against the elements. "From where I stand, the sun is shining all over the place," he tells his beloved Kathy in the midst of a downpour. The notion of romantic union obviating the need for an umbrella – so safe and/or deluded are those in its thrall – recurs at the famed and mocked culmination

of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1993): "Is it still raining? I hadn't noticed." In *Blade Runner* (1982), meanwhile, the incessant rain and melancholy crowds of umbrellas remind us that humanity, for all its sophistication and inventiveness, remains vulnerable to nature's whims.

The umbrellas in *Blade Runner* have shafts that light up, lending an additional source of light to the film's murky neon-infused street scenes. In both *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *Une femme est une femme*, umbrellas function as decorative elements – vehicles for colour. Jacques Demy



Mary Poppins (1964)

allows colour to run rampant in the former film. "In a *reductio ad absurdum* of Hollywood's law of emphasis," writes Richard Misek about the film in *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Colour*, "every item of clothing, every prop, and every flat surface is emphasised." In his first colour film, Jean-Luc Godard gives Angela red as a theme; her umbrella allows her to carry her colour out of the vibrant café interior and into the greyer city streets. It's possible that Godard also intended the umbrella as a reference to the surrealists, who were fond of using them as symbols of the mystique and evocative power of everyday objects. In a recording he made to accompany *Une femme est une femme*, Godard says, "A red umbrella: Aragon," referencing Louis Aragon and perhaps the motto that he and his fellow surrealists borrowed from the writings of the Comte de Lautréamont, who once described a young boy as "as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella".

The umbrella in this encounter is generally interpreted as a male symbol, the sewing machine as female – although this is complicated, of course, by the fact that a sewing machine repeatedly penetrates whereas an umbrella opens and enfolds. The Spanish surrealist writer and painter Remedios Varo had a rather more expansive and intriguing take on the mythic status of the umbrella: in a piece of mock anthropology, which she wrote under the pen name Hälikcio von Fuhrängschmidt, she identified umbrellas as a stage in the evolution of sticks, which aspired to flight and thus acquired "the powerful wings of the pterodactyl".

Umbrellas evolve further in their functionality and perhaps their phallic symbolism when adapted as weapons, often by men who lack or affect to lack standard macho characteristics. A significant model for this usage is John Steed, as played by Patrick Macnee in the TV series *The Avengers*; homage is paid to his deadly umbrella in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981), *Johnny English*

The surrealists were fond of using umbrellas as symbols of the mystique and evocative power of everyday objects

Reborn (2011) and *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2015). A number of films depict the martial arts supremo Wong Fei-hung – mild-mannered doctor by day – deploying an umbrella in a fight.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), meanwhile, umbrellas are employed less as a weapon than as a protective shield, as the assassin makes his escape beneath the tightly clustered brollies of a crowd sheltering from the rain. The souped-up umbrellas occasionally wielded as weapons by the Penguin in *Batman Returns* (1992) also carry this suggestion of shelter, returning us to the theme of femininity and maternal care: symbols of the protection that was lost to him when he was rejected by his parents. **S**

i ***Singin' in the Rain* is showing at BFI Southbank, London, on 15 and 17 January. The latter screening will be introduced by Anna Karina**

THE FIVE KEY...

NEWSPAPER FILMS

As the *Boston Globe* drama *Spotlight* arrives in cinemas, we look back at the most memorable portraits of hacks in the newsroom

By Michael Brooke

"I think it would be fun to run a newspaper," observed Orson Welles's Charles Foster Kane 75 years ago. Filmmakers have found it equally fun to depict the running and indeed filling of newspapers, because intrepid truth-seeking journalists make for near-perfect protagonists, both when propelling a narrative forward and, like Marcello Mastroianni's gossip columnist in *La dolce vita* (1950), when suffering existential crises of confidence. And former reporters such as Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur (*The Front Page*) and David Simon (*The Wire*) often make superb screenwriters, because they've already had extensive training in observing and crystallising human foibles.



2 Sweet Smell of Success (1957)

Alexander Mackendrick's glistening noir masterpiece just about edges Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) as the darkest portrayal of 1950s press venality, but it's a close-fought battle. Tony Curtis gives a career-best performance as press agent Sidney Falco, shameless lickspittle to Burt Lancaster's rivetingly reptilian columnist, JJ. Hunsecker, a man with the power to destroy lives and careers with a stroke of his pen.



4 All the President's Men (1976)

Journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein became major cultural figures after being depicted by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman in a film that premiered just four years after Bernstein wondered whether a burglary at the Watergate complex might be of interest. But it's their relationship with tough-minded *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee (an Oscar-winning Jason Robards) that drives the drama.



1 His Girl Friday (1939)

Hecht and MacArthur's 1928 play *The Front Page* has been filmed multiple times, and Howard Hawks's much loved gender-bending variation ratchets up the sexual tension by making star reporter Hildy Johnson not only a woman (Rosalind Russell) but also the ex-wife of cynical editor Walter Burns (Cary Grant), both of whom deliver some of the cinema's wittiest dialogue at appropriately deadline-driven speed.



3 The Day the Earth Caught Fire (1961)

It's hard to say which is more fantastical: nuclear explosions tilting the planet's axis and sending it sunwards, or the *Daily Express* being depicted as a respected newspaper. But the latter was once the case, and former editor Arthur Christiansen even came out of retirement to play himself (in all but name) in Val Guest's sci-fi disaster film, marshalling the paper's resources to cover the story from every angle.



5 Circle of Deceit (1981)

A war correspondent (Bruno Ganz) undergoes a professional crisis of confidence as he tries to make sense of what's going on around him, for the benefit of editors and readers who he suspects are more interested in sensationalism than accuracy. To add to the sense of authenticity and immediacy, Volker Schlöndorff's film was shot against a backdrop of real-life conflict in Beirut.



Financial Times



The Evening Standard



Time Out



The Times



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ARTIFICIAL EYE

CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION

Tobias Lindholm's Afghanistan-set war crime drama *A War* offers some uncomfortable insights into the morality of modern warfare

By Wendy Ide

Can a war crime be justified? Having pushed his characters to breaking point in the claustrophobic maritime thriller *A Hijacking* (2012), writer/director Tobias Lindholm now turns his focus to the arena of combat. *A War* follows a company of Danish soldiers, led by the decent, cool-headed commander Claus Pedersen (Pilou Asbaek) in Afghanistan's Helmand Province. It's a clear-eyed, non-judgemental examination of the circumstances of a war crime and the subsequent calling to account in a military court. Lindholm, who penned Thomas Vinterberg's *The Hunt* (2012) and was also one of the main writers of the Danish television drama *Borgen* (2010-13), describes his process as one of continual refinement and a quest for authenticity above all else. The result is an unnerving, uncomfortable glimpse of combat which captures better than most modern warfare's assault on logic and the senses.

Wendy Ide: Was there a specific event that inspired this film?

Tobias Lindholm: I wanted to write something about the Danish participation in the war in Afghanistan. But I couldn't find my way in. Then, in 2012, I read an interview with an officer who was going out there on his second term. He said he wasn't afraid of dying there, but he was afraid of getting prosecuted when he got back home. And that opened my eyes to the complexities of the rules of engagement. That gave birth to the story.

WI: You used real soldiers on active duty as extras. Did you have to get approval from the Danish military before you started shooting?

TL: We never allowed them to read the script. They didn't have a say in editing. But they accepted our project and allowed us to cast among their soldiers and offered us material that we needed: uniforms and so on that could help us represent their world correctly.

WI: Did you have any cinematic references, particularly for the combat scenes?

TL: I looked at [Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's 2010 documentary] *Restrepo*. And I looked a lot on YouTube. There is so much brutal footage shot from helmet cams that shows you the reality of war. And it is not as beautiful as in fiction. It's ugly and it's out of control. The most useful thing is to realise that photographers in war zones are afraid of getting shot. So they will take cover. And I learned that. By shooting with the camera down below, it gives the audience an idea that there are places that you can't stay with a camera. So you know it must be dangerous.

WI: You shot in Turkey, using it to double for Afghanistan, with Afghan refugees as extras. Can you talk about the dynamic on set?

TL: I cast in a refugee camp. They are all refugees from Helmand Province where Danish soldiers were. One of the guys, after the casting, told me he had been fighting with the Taliban. And I realised I had to tell the Danish soldiers in the film that they were working with a guy who, four years



Tobias Lindholm: 'Making films is not a career, it's a life'

before, they had probably been shooting at. That was a scary moment. I was shaking. I needed to go outside and have a cigarette. But then I realised that if we can bring real Danish soldiers [on to the project], we need to bring the opposite too.

WI: How did the meeting between the former Taliban fighter and the soldiers play out?

TL: We had a cup of peace tea. And they exchanged stories and started to enjoy themselves. And one of the Danish soldiers said, "I understand this guy better than I understand you, because you didn't fight the war. You were just at home having fun with your kids." And there was some logic to that.

WI: This film sees you reunited with several regular collaborators, notably Pilou Asbaek, who also starred in *A Hijacking*.

TL: Making films is not a career, it's a life. And I

When I write, it's great and time disappears. Then I send it out and go to meetings and it feels like standing there naked




We were soldiers: *A War*

like to share my life with the people I love. I don't change my wife or my friends or my brother or my mother or my kids. It's the same with these guys – especially Pilou, who I work with the most. We are the same age, we started out together. I think he is the best male Scandinavian actor.

WI: Is there a difference in your approach when you are writing a screenplay for yourself and when you are writing for, say, Thomas Vinterberg?

TL: Very much. I always look at it like this: with Pilou and the gang it feels like it's my band. I am writing the songs. And with Vinterberg, I am more like the drummer in his band. And him and Mads Mikkelsen are like the rock stars at the front of the stage. I just keep the rhythm. As a screenwriter, I will try to write the best possible screenplay for Thomas to direct. There's a lot of scenes that I couldn't make. I remember when we did *The Hunt*. There's a scene in a church where everything goes down. And every time I rewrote the script, I would delete that scene. And then Thomas got it and he would send it back to me and it was there again. I would delete it and write to him, "Could we please delete this scene? It's bullshit, I don't believe in it." But when it came to the editing room I was proved wrong; it fits right in there, because it's a Thomas Vinterberg film.

WI: What advice would you give to aspiring screenwriters?

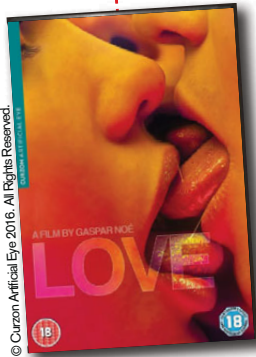
TL: I always feel like, when I sit there and write, it's great and time disappears. And then I send it out and go to meetings and it feels like you pull your pants down and stand there naked and get humiliated for two hours. If you can live with that, go write screenplays. 

 **A War** is released in UK cinemas on 8 January and is reviewed on page 91

fresh produce



love
also available on blu-ray
released 11/01/16



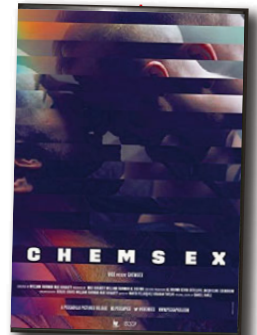
45 years
also available on blu-ray
released 11/01/16



the black panthers
released 11/01/16



chemsex
released 11/01/16



a girl at my door
released 11/01/16



evilspeak
released 25/01/16



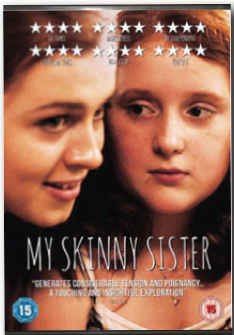
kiss of the spider woman
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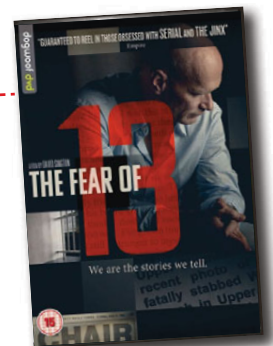
warriors
released 25/01/16



my skinny sister
released 11/01/16



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FLYING COLOURS



Modulating a film's colour palette offers the director a crucial way to suggest shifts within the emotional or physical terrain of the story



By Mark Cousins

By the early 1920s, millions of ordinary people who lived on a planet of chlorophyll green flora, people of shades of melanin

brown from industrial grisaille cities, went to the movies. In doing so, they experienced a world shift. They entered a cinema lobby which was often grander than their own homes – movie palaces, pleasure domes of gilded stucco, Egyptian imagery or, later, art deco architecture.

But then, beyond the lobby, in elaborate auditoria, the lights went down and those people underwent a second world shift, into a kingdom of (mostly) monochrome cinema shadows. Gone were the chlorophyll, the skin colours, the blue sky. On screen was a planet so exotic, so other, that it had its own black-and-white (or tinted) electromagnetic spectrum. The removal of colour was a key ingredient, in those early movie decades, of cinema's ability to tell us that we had transitioned, crossed the Rubicon, escaped the real into the improved, or the metaphysical.

The threshold between colour and black and white has remained potent, a kind of Checkpoint Charlie. Think of that moment in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), when Dorothy, after the tornado, opens the door of her aunt and uncle's house, and glimpses the colours of Oz. The switch from black and white to colour is just as potent as the switch to black and white that the early movie-goers experienced. The

flora of Oz looks like the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, it looks as if Jeff Koons had a hand in it. Life, and plant biology, is more alive in Oz.

Oz is additive, but think now of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). Its rich colour palette disappears when the story shifts to heaven, which is not only in shades of grey, but looks like magnesium or lithium, those white metals which so easily explode. By this stage in film history, black and white was starting to mean realism, the unfantastic, the drab even, but DP Jack Cardiff's imagery in the film is pearlised, luminous, serene. The removal of colour in *A Matter of Life and Death* lifts us off the ground of reality, into a more intangible realm. Another world shift.

Beyond these famous examples, colour in cinema has played it every which way, often trying to convince us that the movie's world is more special, dreamy, desirable, beautiful, happy or enchanted than our world. In *South Pacific* (1958), red and pink filters seem to fog the island on which the story takes place in hot hues. It's like there's been a solar event, a chromatic eclipse of the sun. A similar flooding of the air happens in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), when James Stewart finally sees Kim Novak remade in his image of her: his vision goes turquoise, with touches of pink in the shadows. His desire becomes visible, a kind of synaesthesia. When we're dancing, coloured light works in a similar way – it removes aspects of the world (coloured light is the result of extracting of the colours we don't see) – and perhaps, therefore, reduces

Think of that moment when Dorothy, after the tornado, opens the door of her aunt's house and glimpses the colours of Oz

inhibition. There are long scenes in Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's *Chelsea Girls* (1966) in which projections of coloured light make the world a disco, make the characters dancing queens, make us forget society. Gaspar Noé's throbbing tungsten sex zones are all downstream from *Chelsea Girls*.

All of this is to say that shifting colour is a filmmaker's way of saying that something has changed, the rules of the chess game have been rewritten. In *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), a young couple moves from the joyous world of love to the anxiety of him being drafted to fight in Algeria, to the end of love. They feel that the world around them is in flux. How to depict this visually? Director Jacques Demy, DP Jean Rabier and production designer Bernard Evein use an enhanced chromatic scale – you could call it the love scale. When war hits and love dies, the colours remain bright so that we are left looking at what the couple used to feel, at paradise before it was lost.

Think, too, of Aleksandr Sokurov's *Mother and Son* (1997) and the movies of Roy Andersson, such as *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000). Both are composed almost entirely in shades of green, yellow and grey. Visually subtractive. Aspects of the spectrum are removed. And both give us a great sense that something is being removed from the world. In Sokurov's film, a mother is dying. In Andersson's, it's as if all that Swedish hope for social democracy has gone, leaving flatness, as if the flames have gone, and even the embers are cold. The question to ask when grading a film is not "What colour should this film be?" but "How is this film's world different from the audience's?"

We've made the image on this page one that you can colour in. Go wild. Or tint it like a silent movie. Or use no colour. Or use the hues of Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004) or a film shot by Christopher Doyle. Tweet photos of the results to @SightSoundMag or @markcousinsfilm. 📸

DEVELOPMENT TALE

TRUMBO



Red menace: Helen Mirren as the ultra-conservative Republican gossip columnist Hedda Hopper and Bryan Cranston as her nemesis Dalton Trumbo

The tale of blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter Dalton Trumbo was no easy sell in America – not least because the hero was a communist

By Charles Gant

John McNamara was a dramatic writing undergraduate at New York University in 1984 when he gained access to a semester-long graduate programme taught by formerly blacklisted Hollywood screenwriters Ring Lardner, Jr and Waldo Salt, plus their friend Ian McLellan Hunter. It was from Hunter that the young student learned about Dalton Trumbo, the Oscar-winning screenwriter who refused to yield to the House Un-American Activities Committee, and served 11 months in prison for contempt of Congress in 1950.

"One night I said to Mr Hunter how much I enjoyed his movie *Roman Holiday*, which I'd just seen at a revival house," McNamara says. "He replied, 'I did not write that movie, my friend Dalton Trumbo did'" – going on to explain that he'd lent his name to the screenplay since Trumbo was at the time officially blacklisted by Hollywood for his communist sympathies. Lardner, Salt and Hunter spent the next two days telling the class all about the blacklist era from their own point of view.

McNamara wanted to know more, and Hunter recommended Bruce Cook's biography of Trumbo, published in 1977. "But it was in the pre-Amazon era, and finding a used book was like hunting for the lost Ark of the Covenant. I finally found it in Los Angeles a few months later, and read it many times. Never thought it could be a movie – it was the furthest thing from my mind – until my [producer] friend Kevin Brown saw the book on my shelf, recognised the name of the book's author because he knew Bruce Cook, but had no idea who Dalton Trumbo was." This was in 2008.

"I told him the 15-minute version of Trumbo's life, beginning with HUAC and ending with [him writing] *Spartacus*, and he said, 'That's a movie.' I said, 'Are you kidding me? It's political. It's Hollywood. It's period. There's no action. And the hero's a communist.' And Kevin said, 'That's all true, but it's possibly the greatest David and Goliath story I've ever heard, and unlike most true stories, it has a happy ending.' I was like, 'Oh shit.'"

McNamara had penned numerous screenplays for feature films – both commissioned and on spec – but none of them had been made. And he was happily occupied with his thriving career as a writer and producer of numerous hit television series, which in 2008 included CBS drama *Jericho*. But despite initial misgivings about committing to such an unlikely prospect, McNamara ploughed on, teaming up with

Brown to spend their own money optioning Cook's biography from the author's widow.

Successive drafts followed, but the pair made little headway attracting financing. "We would go to meeting after meeting after meeting," McNamara says. "But, number one, we didn't really know the world of movies so well, and number two, we were doing this in the midst of the great recession, when most movie studios shut down their independent divisions."

In 2011 the pair decided to beef up on the producing side, turning to Michael London, whose film credits included *Sideways* (2004) and *The Illusionist* (2005). "We sent him *Trumbo*, and Michael really did not want to read that script at first," McNamara says. "He told his development executive Kelly Mullen, who's an executive producer on the film, 'I don't want to make this kind of movie any more. It's too hard to make it, too hard to get it released.' She said, 'You have to read the script, just read it.' He did, and he had the exact same reaction I did when Kevin first pitched me the movie. He said, 'Oh shit, we're going to do this.'"

In the research phase, McNamara had already read and drawn on a 2003 essay, 'A Different Childhood', written by Trumbo's elder daughter Nikola. Now, after Jay Roach boarded as director, the screenwriter was encouraged to go further.

McNamara recalls, "It was really Jay: having come off [true political stories] *Game Change* [2012]

and *Recount* [2008] he said, 'I can't tell you how invaluable it's going to be. If you can withstand a little criticism at the beginning, you will reap huge benefits.'" As it turned out, Nikola and her sister Mitzi did not very much like the draft of the script that I sent to them in 2013. Fortunately they were very open to meeting, and being heard. I'm happy to report that they made the script better."


By this time McNamara had made another key change. "In the original draft," he says, "the antagonist was John Wayne, and Jay Roach identified the fact that we have two things going on in this movie conceptually: one is that the hero is a communist, and two, the antagonist is one of the greatest icons of conservative thinking ever. Pick one. I knew there was one person in all of the world that John Wayne was afraid of, and with good reason, and that was Hedda Hopper." The famed gossip columnist, an ardent conservative Republican, became the film's new villain.


Next, the team had to find their Trumbo. "There's kind of a nice story," says McNamara. "There was initially an independent company – I won't name names – who were very interested in financing the movie, and we had several meetings, and we agreed on a shortlist of actors who could then help pre-sell the movie overseas. One of the names was Bryan Cranston, and it was the name that got all of us – me, Jay, Michael – most excited.

He said, 'It's possibly the greatest David and Goliath story I've ever heard, and it has a happy ending.' I was like, 'Oh shit.'

"We sent Bryan's agent, who is a friend of ours, the script on a Thursday, thinking we wouldn't hear for a couple of weeks, and Bryan said yes on Saturday. We excitedly called the financier, who said, 'We don't think Bryan Cranston is right for this, no, no, no.' We said, 'But you put his name on the list.' And they said, 'Well, we've thought about it, and he doesn't really have good international appeal, and he's never carried a movie. Think of someone else.' And we all got together and said, 'How about we unify on this subject: there are many financiers, there's only one Bryan Cranston. Let's find the money somewhere else.'"

With Cranston on board, and Helen Mirren as Hopper, the \$13 million financing in fact proved relatively straightforward, and principal photography began in September 2014, shooting for seven weeks. One of the planets aligning in *Trumbo's* favour may have been the \$230 million global cinema gross of Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012), an inside-Hollywood drama that scooped the Best Picture Oscar in 2013. But McNamara downplays the help it offered.

"I love *Argo*. It's a really good movie. *Argo* has something that we all maybe secretly wished *Trumbo* has, which is an incredibly good spy story. I'm sure it was not an easy movie to get made, but I look at that movie and I go: I could use a couple of guns in *Trumbo*. It would have maybe not taken eight years to get it made." 

 **Trumbo is released in UK cinemas on 5 February and is reviewed on page 89**

THE NUMBERS 2015 REVIEW

By Charles Gant

After a crushingly disappointing 2014 for cinemas, when a lack of major blockbusters meant that admissions dipped significantly, 2015 bounced back, powered by major hits including *SPECTRE*, *Jurassic World*, *Avengers: Age Of Ultron*, *Minions*, *Inside Out*, *Fast & Furious 7* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In the realm of arthouse and independent cinema, January and February proved typically strong, with awards-garlanded titles including *The Theory of Everything*, *Birdman*, *American Sniper* and *Selma* punching through. The autumn then delivered another major crossover hit in the shape of Tom Hardy two-fer *Legend*.

While British indie films targeting a hip, youthful audience (*Catch Me Daddy*, *The Goob, Bypass*) largely missed their mark commercially, home-grown titles aimed at the older demographic cleaned up at the box office. Maggie Smith featured in two of the year's biggest – *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (£16.01 million) and *The Lady in the Van* (£11.26 million) – and must now be considered a box-office draw alongside the likes of Judi Dench and Meryl Streep. The older audience was key to the success of *Suffragette* (£9.77 million), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (£6.18 million), *Brooklyn* (£4.82 million), *Woman in Gold* (£2.89 million), *Testament of Youth* (£2.09 million) and *45 Years* (£1.79 million). *The Lobster* (£1.34 million) was a rare British hit that didn't rely on the grey pound, and *Macbeth* (£2.85 million) was another – both from non-British directors, of course. *Macbeth's* success was put into

Wild Tales




context when Benedict Cumberbatch in *Hamlet* was beamed into cinemas from London's Barbican: at press time it had earned £2.87 million at the box office, including encore showings. The disparity in the budgets of those two offerings must be concentrating many minds.

Asif Kapadia scored another monster documentary hit with *Amy*, eclipsing his earlier *Senna* with £3.76 million – second only to *Fahrenheit 9/11* among non-concert docs in the UK. Elsewhere, it was relatively lean pickings for the genre, with Sebastião Salgado study *The Salt of the Earth* (£299,000) providing the year's second-biggest docu hit.

It's in foreign-language film, however, that 2015 recorded the real crushing disappointment, continuing and deepening the recent downward trend. Consider this: in both 2007 and 2008, five non-Hindi foreign-language films each achieved £1 million at the UK box office. In 2013 (*The Great Beauty*) and 2014 (*The Raid 2*) it was one apiece. This year, as can be seen in the chart below, there are none.

But it's worse. In 2013, nine non-Hindi foreign-language films managed £300,000 or more. In 2014, six did. In 2015, only three crossed the line: *Wild Tales*, *Force Majeure* and *Timbuktu*. Louisa Dent, managing director of Curzon Artificial Eye, who acquired all those titles, reflects: "The change is probably that you can have a good, very well-reviewed film and it doesn't always find an audience any more. For audiences, it has to be something special for them to go to the cinema. I think it has to be very well reviewed, and something more. Both *Wild Tales* and *Force Majeure* had hooks that you could work on and go from that."

With all of Curzon's titles now available on its Curzon Home Cinema platform the same day as theatrical release, this is a trend that does not look set ever to reverse. 

AT UK/IRELAND BOX OFFICE, 2015

FOREIGN-LANGUAGE FILMS

Film	Gross
Wild Tales	£728,057
Force Majeure	£602,674
Timbuktu	£311,029
The Salt of the Earth	£299,424
The New Girlfriend	£238,363
The Connection	£236,793
Girlhood	£232,511
A Pigeon Sat on a Branch...	£176,466
Marshland	£171,802
Mommy	£144,935

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INDIE/CROSSOVER TITLES

Film	Gross
The Theory of Everything	£21,520,916
Legend	£18,354,975
Suffragette	£9,772,377*
Far from the Madding Crowd	£6,184,255
Birdman	£6,050,537
Sicario	£4,942,308*
Amy	£3,763,489
Brooklyn	£4,821,955*
Selma	£3,323,649
Ex Machina	£2,895,294

Grosses to 13 December 2015; *still on release; foreign chart excludes Bollywood films

2015 ROUNDUP

A YEAR IN DOCUMENTARY



Closely observed trains: Albert Maysles's *In Transit* follows three Empire Builder trains on their journeys through the northernmost reaches of the US

From Sheffield Doc/Fest to Copenhagen's CPH:DOX and Amsterdam's IDFA, the past year saw nonfiction cinema on the move

By Nick Bradshaw

Amsterdam's international documentary festival IDFA, the world's biggest, is as old as Errol Morris's affirmed classic *The Thin Blue Line* (1988); and while their 27th anniversary could be called a random moment, this was the year the two came together to mark the road travelled in creative documentary. Morris was the festival's resident 'master', its retrospective guest, and to introduce him on stage, documentary theorist Bill Nichols screened the immortal image of the bone flying skywards in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), then cut to the slow-motion fantasia of the policewoman's milkshake sailing through the night air in *The Thin Blue Line*, a film whose compound refusals of the documentary rulebook (Nichols listed seven, from "feature-film values" to its privileging of emotional impact over information transfer) made it a banner for cinematic nonfiction. "That thump," Nichols declared as the shake splat-landed, "was the sound of documentary shifting."

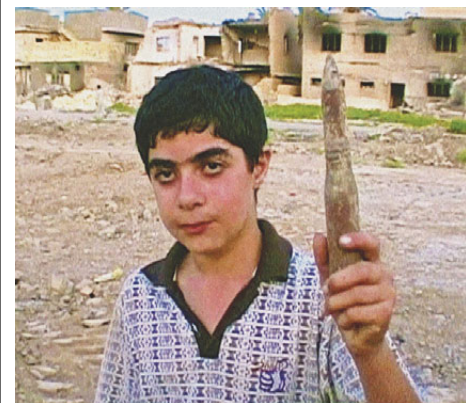
Tub-thumping aside, it's a truism that in

the years following, cinematic and televisual nonfiction have gone their separate ways (for all that we're still trying to parse the relative claims of art and journalism on big-screen documentary). Hence the rising attendance levels internationally for documentary festivals – and in turn the ongoing musical shuffle of festivals jostling for plum calendar dates, in what felt like a transitional year for a number of the European editions. This, for instance, was the last year in which, if you had nothing better to do, you could pack your bags for five weeks of autumn and follow the continent's documentary caravan, from Doclisboa to Jihlava (or Romania's Astra festival in Sibiu) to Leipzig and Copenhagen before IDFA's pre-Christmas blowout; just as Sheffield Doc/Fest moved away from IDFA to a summer berth in 2011, so Copenhagen's ambitiously growing CPH:DOX concluded its November edition with the announcement that it would next arise in March 2017, putting it hot on the tails of North America's comparably trendy and heterodox True/False festival.

Sheffield Doc/Fest for its part will welcome its new director Elizabeth McIntyre with this June's edition, completing a handover from Heather Croall and her team that seemed in train last year, when new head programmer Claire Aguilar unveiled the first of what she vouched would be

a more international programme. I've written before of my hope of seeing Doc/Fest (on behalf of the UK) guarantee a platform for more artful and innovative nonfiction cinema, although there's clearly an appetite for that at London's Open City Documentary Festival, which follows Doc/Fest in June and for its fifth anniversary was able to make good use of a number of new and improved venues. I was lucky enough to visit IDFA and CPH:DOX as well as both British festivals, so what follows is my compound report.

Up on stage at IDFA, Morris decried lazy

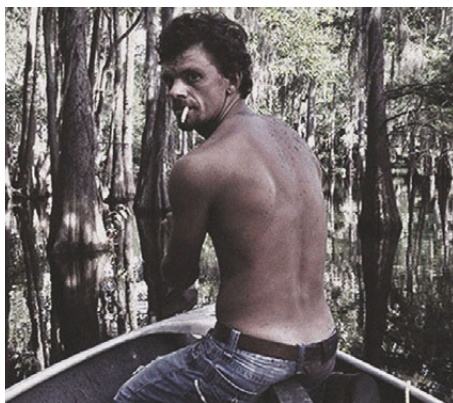


Abbas Fahdal's *Homeland* (Iraq Year Zero)

habits of documentary form, and what we might call its stylistic fallacy: “Just because you’re handholding a camera, or using available light, or not moving the furniture, doesn’t make it a guarantee of truth. Truth is an investigation, a pursuit, in what we all know is a sea of error.” So why not deploy all the resources of cinema? (“Lighting is just a different kind of available lighting,” he quipped.) Morris is of course the great poet of the talking head, and it’s the “unscripted, spontaneous” pronouncements of real people recorded on camera that anchor his films in a nonfiction space and make other people’s mindscapes his canvases of preference. “Consciousness is an enactment of reality inside our skulls,” he said, adding that the best nonfiction makes you think about the distance between us and the world. Nichols quoted Lily Tomlin – “Reality is a collective hunch” – but lately Morris has seemed to double down on the interiorities of the singular minded: “I used to say, if you leave [subjects] alone and don’t interrupt them, within three or four minutes they’ll show you how crazy they are.”

Morris’s misanthropy stood in contrast to the congeniality of Albert Maysles, the late Direct Cinema master, whose swansong *In Transit*, shot with a team of younger collaborators up and down the carriages of three Empire Builder trains carrying travellers home and away through the northernmost reaches of America, bore out his long-harboured ambition for the film as a vehicle for introspection and the expression of reflections and hope. Ditto the late Eduardo Coutinho’s *Last Conversations*, a simple and gracious series of parleys with young Brazilians invited one by one into his studio to sit and represent themselves.

But as it happens, mental illness, and tangential mysteries, have been a refrain in documentaries this year. IDFA’s main jury prize went to Jerzy Sladkowski’s *Don Juan*, a portrait of a mental/moral *pas de deux* between a young Russian introvert and the mother determined to cure his ailments. Doc/Fest showed Solveig Melkeraaen’s *Good Girl* – an auto-portrait of the filmmaker’s depression and electroshock therapy that used *vérité* (outsourced, where necessary, to her DP) and fantasy sequences to probe the breakdown of a Type-A personality – and Aaron Wickenden and Dan Rybicki’s *Almost There*, an embedded portrait of an ailing and troubled outsider artist, *Crumb*-like but more involved, shot with some drama over a period of years. And IDFA and



Roberto Minervini’s *The Other Side*



The kids are all right: Robert Machoian and Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck’s *God Bless the Child*

Just because you’re handholding a camera doesn’t make it a guarantee of truth Truth is an investigation in a sea of error

CPH:DOX both showed *Man Falling*, Anne Regitze Wivel’s sympathetic record of the attempt by her friend, the painter and sculptor Per Kirkeby, to recover from a stroke. She didn’t push the point, but Regitze Wivel hadn’t picked up her camera since a similar stroke carried away her husband.


The complex psychologies of elusive family members – so close, so distant! – also drove two fine diaristic investigations reminiscent of Sarah Polley’s exemplary *Stories We Tell* (2012). Karen Guthrie’s Open City prize-winner *The Closer We Get* (reviewed in our January issue) has to pursue her father from Scotland to Djibouti, while in Tom Fassaert’s IDFA opener *A Family Affair*, the Dutch filmmaker is able to draw on a rich home-movie archive to illustrate – but also has to move to South Africa and then take an ocean cruise to prise open – the oyster-like and deeply perverse heart of his grandmother.

The stories we tell – or act out – has been the dominant theme in creative nonfiction since, at the very least, the 2012 double whammy of Polley’s film and Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*; that duality of truth and fiction has also been the stock-in-trade at CPH:DOX, which manages to bridge catholicism and innovation in its programming. I didn’t find any likely breakout hits there this year, though there were many fans of Roberto Minervini’s *The Other Side* – a boldly intimate and oft-times lyrical elopement through the underbelly of Louisiana that finds defiantly untrashy poetry among his performers – and for Pietro Marcello’s exceptionally eccentric folk pantomime *Lost and Beautiful*. The CPH jury gave its top award to Robert Machoian and Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck’s *God Bless the Child*, in which a family of five Southern Californian suburban teenagers are abandoned by their mother and left to their own devices through a long, languorous day; one of

the filmmakers is the children’s father, so for all its light-touch narrative and extended observation, the movie clearly starts in the realms of fiction and improvises certain realities therein (not least in a backyard fight between two of the brothers).

Strange to tell, that paradox of nonfiction couched in fiction also played out on a larger stage in Vitaly Mansky’s *Under the Sun*, an erstwhile coproduction with the (North) Korea Film Export & Import Corporation which purports to depict an average/model North Korean family whose daughter is preparing for her glorious ascent to the ranks of the Korean Union for Children. Despite being overseen as closely as any studio hack, Mansky grabs every opportunity to demonstrate the entirely scripted, rewritten, falsified, censored and genuflecting nature of this project. It’s an eerie watch – not only because of its emphatically shallow field of sound – and an uncomfortable one, since these characters clearly don’t have the agency of even the revisionist goons in *The Act of Killing*, and perhaps not even the imagination. The movie can only speculate on exactly how fictional it is, but the weight of a command society is palpable.

For contrast I could cut here to David Bernet’s *Democracy*, a likeable record of European Union treaty politicking over data protection; or Friedrich Moser’s *A Good American*, a compelling piece of revenge journalism about NSA renegade William Binney that usefully fills in the story between 9/11 and Edward Snowden – but final word must go to Abbas Fahdel’s *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)*, an epic two-part tapestry of family life under the shadow, and in the aftermath, of the American invasion. The most successful of several long-form journal films this year, winner of festival prizes from Visions du Réel to Yamagata, it’s tragic, eye-opening and deeply reproachful. Errol Morris can follow Donald Rumsfeld down all the rabbit holes he likes, but sometimes sanity just needs time to be heard. 

 **Robert Greene’s ‘Best of 2015 in Cinematic Nonfiction’ and Nick Bradshaw’s best archival documentaries of the past year will be online at bfi.org.uk/sightandsound later this month**

QUENTIN TARANTINO

An ill-assorted collection of bounty hunters, outlaws and fugitives with competing agendas take shelter in a stagecoach stop-off during a blizzard in *The Hateful Eight*. In an exclusive interview, in which the director's famously garrulous enthusiasm for films of all stripes remains undimmed, he discusses his new western's countless influences, and recalls the early works that made his name. **Interview by Kim Morgan**

Spoiler warning!

When Quentin Tarantino is excited by a movie, it's hard to think of anyone else you might know – indeed, anyone you could meet in your lifetime – who makes you want to see that movie more. Success, money, fame... none of that, it seems, has damped down his enthusiasm for the world of cinema, be it for an obscure but perfectly recalled film or, say, the way a favourite actor, such as Ralph Meeker, aged. “Fat sweaty Meeker!” he proclaims, a vision of the actor which is every bit as interesting to him as Meeker's more commonly remembered younger, smirking, sexy Mike Hammer in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). In Tarantino's alternative reality dream casting, “fat sweaty Meeker” could have been a character in his newest picture, the western *The Hateful Eight*. That film's ‘Meeker’ is played by Kurt Russell, a wizened, rough bounty hunter who, in the thick of a blizzard, is trying to transport venom-spewing prisoner Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh) to Red Rock, Wyoming.

In the racially charged America of a few years after the American Civil War, two others join their stagecoach: bounty hunter Major Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson) and Chris Mannix (Walton Goggins), supposedly the new sheriff of Red Rock. We meet more enigmatic, likely duplicitous characters after the stagecoach takes shelter in Minnie's Haberdashery, including the Mexican Bob (Demián Bichir), the dapper Brit Oswaldo Mobray (Tim Roth), the quiet cowboy Joe Gage (Michael Madsen) and an old Confederate general, Sanford Smithers (Bruce Dern). What follows is a tense, funny, bloody and subversive mystery, a wonderfully bent chamber piece that carries the unique distinction of working both as a claustrophobic stage play (he organised a well-received public script reading with his cast on stage in Los Angeles in April 2014) and a beautiful 70mm spectacle that, in its select road show version, features an overture, intermission and additional footage. It's one of the weirdest Tarantino pictures and also one of his best.

I sat down for a long chat with the director in December at his Los Angeles home, digging

into multiple topics, including the politics of the western, violence in cinema and the impact of seeing *Deliverance* (1972) as a boy. We also talked about his politics, something that caused controversy in October last year, after he made a statement at a Black Lives Matter rally protesting against police brutality, which so angered police groups that many not only vowed to boycott *The Hateful Eight*, but issued a veiled threat to the director himself. True to form, though, Tarantino isn't scared.

Kim Morgan: Let's start with *The Hateful Eight*. This is another western and, in many ways, like *Django Unchained* [2012], a political one. You've said you originally didn't think of it politically in terms of current times and yet the movie has become that. The western genre is often an effective way to explore psychological, political and cultural themes, throughout the history of cinema... would you agree?

Quentin Tarantino: I've always felt that, actually. If you read any of the really interesting subtextual criticism on westerns, especially leading into the late 60s and into the 70s, they have always done a pretty good job reflecting the decade in which they were made without seemingly trying to. When westerns were probably at their most popular, during the 50s, they definitely put forth an Eisenhower-esque America. And it was also an America and an American West that was

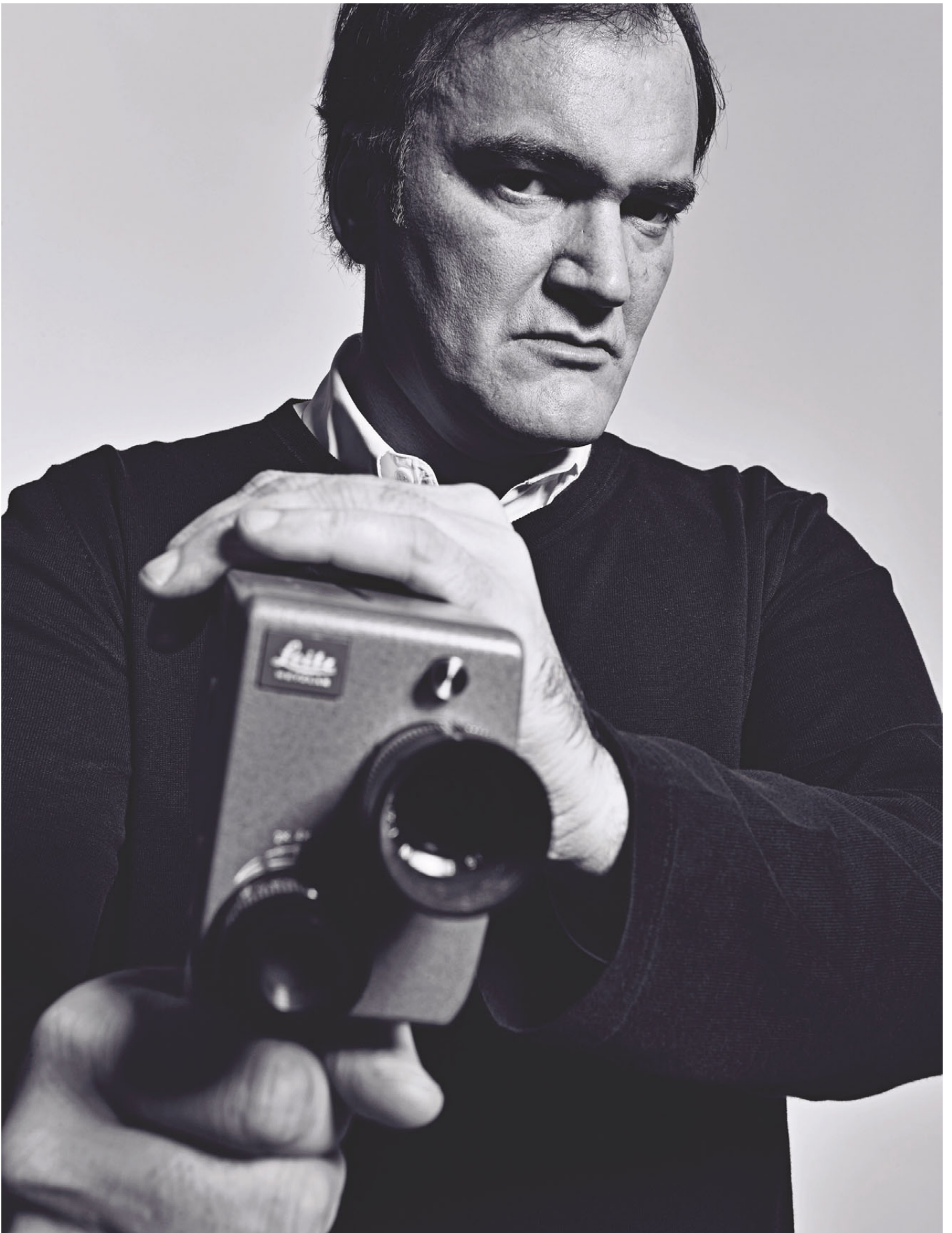
flush with American exceptionalism – having just won World War II and with the advent of the suburbs. That was very important to westerns back then. And even, in an interesting way, while they weren't bold enough in the 50s to deal with the race problem in America – ie, between blacks and whites, since the race problem between Indians and whites was long since over with – they actually tried to somewhat deal with black and white issues via *Indian* and white issues. Like [Delmer Daves's] *Broken Arrow* [1950]... In the case of *Broken Arrow*, Jeff Chandler, in particular, became a big box-office draw for black people in America because of his performance as Cochise in that film. And that continued during the first half of the 60s, which was basically the 50s, part II. But from 1966 on, things started changing and spaghetti westerns went a long way toward doing that: the stylisation, the use of music, but also the counterculture. So by '68, '69, '70 and '71, you had the hippie westerns, the counterculture westerns, whether they be *Kid Blue* [1973] or *The Hired Hand* [1971] or *Zachariah* [1970], things like that. The 70s, particularly in America, was one of the best times for the western. And the changes went further into the 70s; it increased as the decade went on, [in terms of] the true ‘anti-western’, because so many of the different westerns at that time dealt with the Vietnam War, in one way or another.

KM: Like Robert Aldrich's *Ulzana's Raid* [1972]...

QT: Yes. *Ulzana's Raid* is the perfect example. Most of the Vietnam metaphor movies don't work quite as well any more, because you're thinking, “Well, why didn't you just make a movie about Vietnam?” *Ulzana's Raid* actually still completely works as a Vietnam metaphor, because that was underneath it, and what was on top of it was a war movie about the American Indian wars, about the cavalry fighting a nomad army, about how warfare like that is done. So it was legitimately a war movie about those times and taken seriously as a war movie in a way that most movies dealing with that subject didn't do. But you had a situation during that era of, “We can't trust our government for getting us into this war: they said it was this; it wasn't, we don't”



Quentin Tarantino (left) on *The Hateful Eight* set



trust them..." – all the different hypocrisies that kept rearing their ugly heads leading to Watergate. And so one of the things that was so interesting about that New Hollywood time period, and particularly reflected from 1969-74, not only did the happy ending go away, it was the vogue to have the cynical ending – the cynical, hypocritical, tragic ending. We were cynical about America, and these movies just confirmed our cynicism about the subjects. And because we were cynical about America, you see movies that rip down the statues we had built. So you see Frank Perry's *'Doc'* [1971], which skewers the Wyatt Earp legend. And then, after everyone from Roy Rogers to almost everybody else played Jesse James, you have Robert Duvall playing him in *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* [1972] where he's a homicidal maniac; it's completely horrifying. And then Michael J. Pollard in *Dirty Little Billy* [1972]...

KM: 'Billy was a punk'.

QT: [Laughs] Exactly, right. And Michael J. Pollard looking like that one famous photo of William H. Bonney, more than Robert Taylor ever did. [Laughs] *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is miles away from the Tyrone Power Jesse James movie. And leading to the most overt Watergate western, *Posse* [1975], directed by Kirk Douglas, starring Douglas and Bruce Dern; written by William Roberts, who wrote the screenplay for *The Magnificent Seven* [1960].

KM: And in terms of *The Hateful Eight*, recently, in your real life politically, it's interesting because you've had all of this...

QT: Brouhaha [Laughs].

KM: Yes. Brouhaha with the police, which became ridiculous. No one with any sense can be on board with their statements and methods towards protesting against you – the intimidation.

QT: Oh, yeah, I know. It's been an interesting four weeks as far as that was concerned [Laughs]. The first week, everyone was piling on me. And then, the second week, I react to it and that was kind of interesting because all of a sudden everyone on TV ended up having some sort of say about it, so I thought, "Wow, this is good that this much about police brutality is being dealt with and is in the news so much." And then the cops do themselves no favours by issuing genuine threats. The funny part about it is, people ask, "Well, are you worried?" And of course I'm not worried. At the end of the day I don't feel that the police are some sort of sinister Black Hand organisation that singles out private citizens to fuck over. Nevertheless, a civil service entity shouldn't even be putting out threats, even in a rhetorical nature, towards private citizens and the fact that they're using language that makes them sound like bad guys in an 80s action movie doesn't help their cause any. In fact, it almost makes *my* cause. Almost sounds as if they're out of touch [Laughs].

KM: Going back to themes in *The Hateful Eight*, it's interesting that you take these two disenfranchised characters, in the beginning, Daisy and Major Warren, a woman and an African-American man, and they wind up as the leads of the film.

QT: Had I set out to do all of that, if I had set out to deal with these sort of issues, I could be looked at like I was patting myself on the back. And I



Eye of the storm: Jennifer Jason Leigh as Daisy Domergue in *The Hateful Eight*

The idea that I would give a female character some blanket coat of invincibility in regard to brutality is a ridiculous concept

guess I did set it up just a little bit. But when I first started putting pen to paper, it wasn't. "Oh my god, this is going to be my most political film ever." I didn't know where I was going with any of it. I was writing my way through it, the way the characters are on their journey, so each new person who joins the stagecoach ups the stakes a little bit and the dynamics change... I actually consider the Confederacy the equivalent of the Nazi party and I've felt that way for a very long time, and America is finally catching up with how I have always felt about the rebel flag. Having said that, [the sheriff] Chris Mannix makes a very sober defence for his dad who was a Quantrill Raider [pro-Confederate guerrilla] type guy. And I was shocked when I wrote it, because that's not how I feel. But I was just doing what a writer does: I was being the character and that came out of Chris. This isn't my philosophy, of course, but that is Chris's philosophy; I didn't judge Chris.

KM: But he also grows into something of a comrade of Samuel L. Jackson's



Walton Goggins as Sheriff Chris Mannix

Warren. If a Confederate racist and a Union African-American man could maybe come together, put them in a room of murderous double-crossing scumbags...

QT: Well, that goes a long way. I did realise that it could have ended up where Warren and Daisy find themselves on a similar page by the very end. But I was very happy by the way it turned out. By the time you get to the bloody finish of the movie they've earned their camaraderie... The way the movie ends now, in the first draft, it just seemed too cruel for Daisy to go there. In the first draft, I didn't want to make her the villain quite that easily. And if I'm not mistaken, in the first draft she gets killed rather arbitrarily leading towards the climax. And that was so not what I expected to do. I kind of broke my own dramatic structure a little bit. Well, that can be good... I sat with the material, which I don't normally do. And then I wrote a second draft completely from Daisy's perspective. Not that I completely rewrote it or completely restructured it, but, me, the writer, was looking at it through Daisy's eyes. And that was my attempt to get to know her more, get to understand her more. Now I knew Daisy enough. She didn't earn it enough, at first, because I didn't know her enough. I needed to know her fully. *Then* I could hang her.

KM: About her character: it might be a bit controversial for some because she gets smacked around a lot; she's taking it as tough as anyone else and the fact that she's endured this before is part of who she is...

QT: There's an interesting aspect to that. No one's yet to nail me in person about that aspect: that she takes so much abuse in the course of the movie and I'm almost looking forward to it because I'm curious as to exactly where they're coming from. You feel it ripple through the audience the first few times she gets the shit beat out of her. And you feel it in old movies too, you know, when the girl is hysterical and the guy just smacks the shit out of her: "I'm sorry, honey. I hated to do

that, but you're off your nut." [Laughs] But that's different. When Daisy is really hit the first time, she's saying rude shit: "You're not going to let that nigger in here?" And he cracks her skull.

KM: And the first time he [John Ruth, played by Kurt Russell] hits her, it follows with such a powerful close-up of her slightly vulnerable and then angry face. You have a lot of mixed feelings when you see that shot. You do feel for her. You've just met her. How despicable is she?

QT: Oh, I think it's one of the best shots. And, yes, yes, all of those questions are left to be answered. She's definitely a rude, hateful bitch, that's for damn sure, but his response is so brutal. He didn't just punch her; he takes the butt of his gun and cracks her in the skull really hard. And that close-up, yes, she's fantastic in the close-up. And, you realise just how bad he hit her when the blood starts dripping down her face. But you have this feeling of, "Ohhh... this is going to be that kind of movie" and it's just starting off. And nobody's not going to be on Daisy's side after that, in some way or another, because you'll think: John Ruth is a brutal, brutal man. And you're right: John Ruth is a brutal, brutal man. If the movie were on John Ruth's side at that point then maybe somebody might have a more righteous pen, writing a subtextual article about it. But the movie is obviously not on John Ruth's side at


that point. And especially in the stagecoach... But things change as they go on. It's part of the way the story works; anything can happen to any one of these eight characters. The idea that I would give a female character some blanket coat of invincibility in that regard is just a ridiculous concept; it would be detrimental to her and to the sex of her character if I played any favourites.

KM: You often have your actors do some in-depth prep. I spoke to Michael Fassbender about his work on *Inglourious Basterds* [2009] and he talked about watching George Sanders and Trevor Howard and studying Pabst... Did you do the same here?

QT: It's always a little different. Michael was supposed to be a film critic *par excellence*. He's written both a book on Pabst and a book on German cinema of the 1920s. So I didn't want him to spout a bunch of names he'd never heard of – I wanted him to watch a lot of different Pabst movies. So I showed him *The Joyless Street* [1925] and silent German cinema. But this didn't require

At the end of the day I don't feel the police are some sort of sinister Black Hand organisation that singles out private citizens

anything like that. That is one of the interesting things about a theatre piece, as opposed to a film piece. In a film piece oftentimes actors will busy themselves about the backstory and things that led the characters to be here. And I definitely have to have that happen. I said to the actors [on *The Hateful Eight*], "Come the day you need to do this, you need to do this. And not just suffer through it. I put it in there as a character trait and if you screw this up, you've screwed both of us up." Demián [Bichir] did not know how to play the piano when we started, and he learned how to play the piano. Jennifer [Jason Leigh] did not know how to play the guitar, and she learned how to play the guitar. And both of those are very impressive. And it was literally right out of my brain, the way I saw it, the way Kurt Russell dismantles the guns, just takes them apart. I even wrote in the script that they're like dirt clods that he's just crumbling into the bucket, and that's exactly how it comes across.

But with the exception of things like that, with a theatre piece, the material is enough. We're going to dive into this material, we're going to chew the rag on this material and we're gonna know it. It started with our three-day rehearsal, with the script reading, and then we had a reading of the second draft of the script, and then a reading of the third draft and then three weeks' rehearsal, and then we jumped into it. 



In the line of fire: Kurt Russell as vicious bounty hunter John Ruth with Samuel L. Jackson as former Union soldier Major Marquis Warren

KM: I brought up some other westerns I thought might have inspired you, like André De Toth's *Day of the Outlaw* [1959] or William Wellman's *Track of the Cat* [1954], these snowbound westerns, but you've talked about how you were inspired by television westerns like *Bonanza* [1959-73] and *The Virginian* [1962-71], particularly because there would be these fantastic guest stars on those shows, those who would play the villains, like Lee Van Cleef or Charles Bronson...

QT: Yes, that's it. And Robert Culp too. And, when those shows had a big-name guest star like them, they were the star of the story. Michael Landon or Doug McClure are just helping them out, or it's a guessing game: are they the protagonist like me or are they the antagonist? And just the idea that, in these guest stars, they always had a past that is revealed at some point, and the truth or the untruth of that past literally becomes the story point going forward. I even played a fun game of imagining who I would cast in *The Hateful Eight* if I were doing this in 1969.

KM: Who would you cast?

QT: Well, for the John Ruth character, Claude Akins. I think Claude Akins did about nine *Gunsmites* and he's great in every single one of them. And they are all variations on this rough, bitter guy. But if I were doing it in 1969, Bill Cosby would be Major Warren...

I've shot a lot of movies with Sam Jackson, but I don't think I've ever gotten the close-ups of him that I've got using 70mm

KM: With some Lee Van Cleef. Jackson looks like Van Cleef here. His hair looks exactly like Van Cleef's; you did this on purpose, right?

QT: Oh yeah, yeah. Sam Jackson definitely looks like Lee Van Cleef. Short of casting Snoop Dogg in the movie, because Snoop Dogg and Lee Van Cleef look exactly alike, I did everything I could to make Sam Jackson look like Lee Van Cleef. I'm not sure who Daisy would be, but Bruce Dern would be Chris Mannix. You could go one of two ways with Chris Mannix. You could go the Bruce Dern way or you could go the Christopher Jones way, which could be interesting. Maybe Robert Culp would be Joe Gage. Terry-Thomas would be perfect as Oswaldo Mobray and Tim Roth did his best to give me Terry-Thomas. Jody, I could either see being another good part for Bruce Dern if I went the Chris Jones way for Chris Mannix. But Vic Morrow would be a wonderful Jody... Ralph Meeker would have been a good John Ruth. Fat Meeker!

KM: One thing I find interesting about the old western shows and that time in television

in general, was that it was this period during which some seasoned, interesting directors like Joseph H. Lewis were directing episodes of *The Rifleman* [1958-63] while newer guys were also coming in, like Robert Altman directing *Bonanza*.

QT: Yep. *Bonanza*, and he also made episodes of *Combat* [1962-67]...

KM: And then you had John Cassavetes starring in *Johnny Staccato* [1959-60] and Ben Gazzara in *Run for Your Life* [1965-68] and then an old movie star like Barbara Stanwyck leading *The Big Valley* [1965-69]. And, on top of that, you'd see all these unique, particular talents with guest stars like Warren Oates doing all kinds of things...

QT: Him and Bruce Dern were sidekicks in *Stoney Burke* [1962-63], the Jack Lord rodeo show.

KM: Yes. A show with great cold openings... And then *The Virginian*...

QT: Yeah. I'm a huge fan of, in particular, the William Witney episodes of *The Virginian*. His episodes are really terrific because he actually had the budget that he didn't quite have while at Republic Pictures. They were like 90-minute movies and were actually released as movies overseas. But Sam Fuller did a magnificent episode of *The Virginian* ['It Tolls for Thee', 1962], which he wrote and directed. It's a Sam Fuller episode in every way. It stars Lee Marvin as the bad guy who kidnaps Lee J. Cobb and the episode is all about



Scarf face: Samuel L. Jackson as Major Marquis Warren

that kidnapping. Marvin and Fuller wouldn't work together again until *The Big Red One* [1980]. It's Sam Fuller dialogue from beginning to end. And, I have to say; I took one line from it for *The Hateful Eight*. I won't say the line in my movie, but I'll say the line from *The Virginian*: Lee Marvin runs an outlaw gang and then another guy in the gang, a guy named Sharkey, starts talking to the gang to try to get them to forget about Lee Marvin and Lee Marvin just shoots him in the back. Lee Marvin says, "One measly bullet and there goes the problem of Sharkey." [Laughs]

KM: Getting into the shooting of the film: it's interesting that you used Ultra Panavision 70 and yet there are a lot of close-ups, which I appreciated, because while you have beautiful, vast shots of vistas in the snow, you've also got this chamber piece with people and faces. And I always think there's as much terrain on a human face for that format. Why forgo the close-up, even with that scope?

QT: I absolutely agree. There was a lot of speculation from some people about this whole 70mm thing, as in, "That's really great, but it's just this set-bound parlour piece, so isn't it just a big old fucking waste of time and money?" I think that's a shallow view of how 70mm can be employed. It's not just to shoot the Seven Wonders of the World, the Sahara desert and mountain ranges. You can do more than just shoot weather... I've shot a lot of movies with Sam Jackson, but I don't think I've ever gotten the close-ups of him that I've got in this. You drink in the chocolate of his skin, you swim in those eyes that he has. And also, it becomes about the dialogue. You enjoy him saying the dialogue both audibly but you enjoy watching him say it at the same time.

There's an aspect to the movie that's supposed to be claustrophobic, that's part of how the tension works. It wouldn't be the same if everything took place in the open barn where something could possibly escape. There's a hothouse atmosphere here. All of these weasels are in one bag. But there's claustrophobic in a good way, a way that helps the tension, and then there's claustrophobic in an uninspired, uninteresting way, because you've seen it all. And one of the things I thought this format ended up doing, especially when I started watching the movie: If you're sitting from the middle to the back, you're having one viewing experience. You're watching the framing of it all, you're watching the artistry of it, a little bit more presentational a version of it. Five rows towards the front, you are *in* the movie, you are in Minnie's Haberdashery. You are not watching it, you are in it. And that is something about this format that is really special.

KM: You must have had some challenges shooting on Ultra Panavision?

QT: Not really. We couldn't attach that big-ass camera to a Steadicam. But I wasn't interested in the idea of a Steadicam in a western anyway. I don't think I used it at all on *Django*... The only limitation we had was we couldn't zoom lenses. And I'd really gotten used to using the zoom. So that was robbed from my paint box. But I looked at that as an interesting challenge. It was stimulating to do work outside of my comfort zone. [Director of photography] Bob



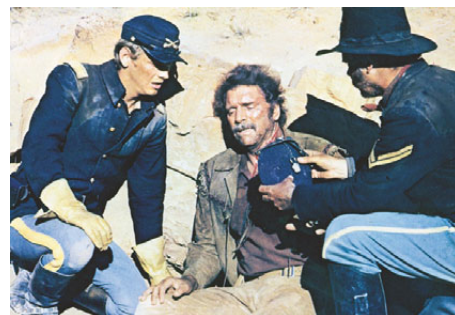
The Virginian: Sam Fuller's 'It Tolls for Thee'

Richardson and I used a crane the way other people use a Steadicam and we used a crane the way other people use a dolly. If we could put it on the crane, we did it on the crane.

KM: You're presenting the movie in a meaningful way with the road shows, because we don't get those special experiences in movies anymore. That's part of it...

QT: That is absolutely part of it. It's actually kind

I did everything I could to make Sam Jackson look like Lee Van Cleef—short of casting Snoo Dogg in the movie




Robert Aldrich's *Ulzana's Raid*

of cool to make this point, especially in *Sight & Sound*: I don't want to fetishise the 70mm experience so much that I'm saying ignore the movie when it's on DCP when it's playing at a mall near you... and, frankly, I was actually sitting at this table as I was talking to the Weinstein group about 70mm and the road show and I actually even said to them: "Look, I wouldn't feel quite confident enough in the case of, say, *Inglourious Basterds* or *Django* to be talking about the film presentation and how it's going to be released before I'd made the movie for the simple fact that both *Django* and *Inglourious Basterds* had to be deciphered. I had to make them. It wasn't enough just writing them because they weren't blueprints. They were these weird,



Top gun: Lee Van Cleef in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, which fed into *The Hateful Eight*'s costumes

 unwieldy little novels that I thought were very good in a literary sense, so I'm on the set every day with a novel, turning it into a movie. Now that's a crazy way to make a movie, but it kind of works for me. I like it and it's very challenging and in a really good way: it allows me to give over all of my literary talent to the page and then turn over all of my filmmaking talent to the film. This wasn't that. This was the piece. The play is the thing and that script reading went a long way. This is it. This is solid. I shoot that, with these actors, I will have a good product at the end, so it allowed me to think in more grandiose terms. Or put the cart a bit before the horse. The road show version is four minutes longer, the movie's not that different, but your viewing experience is very different. Watching the movie with an intermission and watching it without an intermission, it's a different experience. A case can be made that maybe the DCP version is more intense. And then you have the intermission and everyone has something to talk about.

KM: Yes. Especially with that volatile scene, between Jackson and Dern, leading it out...

QT: Yes, it's very much like an opera. It builds like a big crescendo at the end of its big curtain act in the middle. And it has that. And you come down from it, and you have a smoke, you have some popcorn, or you take a piss, or you talk to your friends in the lobby, or you talk to the person next to you and it's "Ahhh..." But pretty quickly, once it starts up again, it gets right into it. Well, without that intermission, the movie's not really that different, but the experience can be vastly different. Also, the mall version or the multiplex version, it's a movie this year. Nothing wrong with that. That's the version that will play on Showtime, and that's a good movie. It works. If you go see the 70mm version, to me that is like seeing *The Iceman Cometh* on Broadway with Al Pacino playing Hickey; like seeing *La Bohème* at La Scala. If you paid the money to see the 70mm version, you're mine. You've given yourself completely over to me for me to take you on this trip. And it is special. What I have noticed since I've been making movies is theatres are giving you less and less. Every five years they took more and more away from the experience, until, shit! They're just renting you a seat now. [Laughs]

KM: And the road show shares history with movies like *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* [1963]...

QT: Yes, that's a good example. And *Battle of the Bulge* [1965], Brando's *Mutiny on the Bounty* [1962]...

KM: Totally interesting, almost crazy Brando performance...

QT: Yes. He's such a supercilious asshole in that movie. [Laughs]

KM: Speaking of keeping a tradition alive, you've kept alive the New Beverly [a cherished Los Angeles repertory cinema that Tarantino bought in 2007 to save from closing down, and one he took over entirely last year, programming films only to show in 35mm and 16mm, never digitally projected]. It's wonderful that all movies are showing in 35mm. Because I would often scroll through what's playing and see DCP presentation and think, "Why would I go see this?" I saw *M* projected once and the Criterion menu came up on the screen. What a buzzkill.

QT: I'm glad you said that because that was becoming my dilemma. And, you know, fuck that shit. I have a print. I could have lent you my print. I could go and screen my print. I was making a statement by making it all 35 or 16 at the New Beverly. That is what we're working towards. If we can find a film print, we'll show it. There is no consolation prize. It was a statement to the audience. If you come to the New Beverly, it will be on film. You don't have to guess, you don't have to do any homework, there is no internet search you need to do, the prints will be as good as we can make them – that's not always a bad thing...

KM: Some of them have their own beauty when they're faded...

QT: Some of them do. And, god, if those prints could talk. The stories they could tell you about their lives: where they've been, what they've shown, how they've shown it. I mean, if they can't get through the projector, that's a different story. If it's completely red, that's a different story. And sometimes that happens, but everyone's rooting for us. If one of the projectors ends up breaking and we have to show it one reel at a time, then the audience gets it. And they root for us; they're down there and they're with it. And it's a lovely experience as opposed to just going to another theatre where they just hit 'play'.

KM: When I saw Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky* [1976], you showed a trailer for *The Killers* [1964] and when Clu Gulager popped up, everyone cheered.

QT: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Well, any time you're showing a Clu, you're playing one for the stands there. Clu is the Mrs. Miller of the New Beverly. [Laughs]

The suits in 'Reservoir Dogs' help it because they give it a timeless quality, like the dusters in Leone or the trench coats in Melville

KM: There's a retro and timeless qualities to your movies, even this one, which is firmly planted in the past. But the use of music is interesting to help present this, from having the great Ennio Morricone score it, to the songs you choose. A White Stripes song, for *Daisy*, which is newer. The Roy Orbison song 'There Won't Be Many Coming Home', which is such a beautiful song...

QT: From *The Fastest Guitar Alive* [1967].

KM: And then you had the David Hess song 'Now You're All Alone' in there too...

QT: That was interesting. I had the David Hess song in there, and I showed it to you guys. OK. Now, let me invite a couple of people over and show it to them – I'm not dealing with the whole bigness of the 70mm, it was just to watch the movie and see what they think. And so I invited Eli Roth, editor Bob Murawski and Paul Thomas Anderson. I was really curious to see if Bob and Eli would skewer me for using the David Hess song.

KM: Why would they skewer you?

QT: Well, for the reason that I used it exactly how it was used in *The Last House on the Left* [1972]. I mean, *exactly*. Not sort of, kind of. *Exactly*. And whenever I've used music before I've never used it exactly the way it was used. But it just worked so well, I couldn't not and then I thought that David Hess, who has passed on, would appreciate it, he would be happy about it. There's something about David Hess scoring a Michael Madsen murder scene, there was something kind of beautiful about that.

KM: But now more people will know it on a mass scale. In addition to putting actors back in the spotlight, you've also helped resurrect, to a mass audience – because music aficionados always listened to it anyway – the music of Dick Dale and Link Wray.

QT: Yes, Link Wray. Jim McBride uses Link Wray perfectly throughout *Breathless* [1983].

KM: Like Morricone and Wray, who are both classic and incredibly experimental and far ahead of their time – Morricone with his



The shooting party: Steve Buscemi and Harvey Keitel in *Reservoir Dogs* (1991)



Pulp Fiction (1994)

whip cracks and howling animal sounds, and then Link Wray was experimenting with sound by poking holes in amps, recording in a chicken coop, much of this due to budget constraints too – you did the same with cinema language, which doesn't date the work...

QT: Well, *Pulp Fiction* [1994] and *Reservoir Dogs* [1991] in particular, and the black suits go a long way to help it out because they give it that timeless quality, which, in their own way, the dusters give Leone or the trench coats give Jean-Pierre Melville, or the sleek sharkskin suit that the yakuza guys wear in the Takakura Ken movies from the 60s and into the 70s. The only thing between the two movies, the only thing culturally – and even then it was a little out of date – was the brick phone that Chris Penn talks on. We had graduated a little past that by then. I just had Chris Penn use that phone because they weren't using them a lot in American movies, but in Hong Kong movies they were using them all the time. It was *de rigueur* in a Hong Kong movie that characters would be giving orders on one of the brick phones. But that's the only thing. I remember Bruce Willis showed up on *Pulp Fiction* with a goatee he wanted to wear. And I had to tell him, "I don't want you to wear the goatee and here's why: you look really good in it, but it's a fashion thing from right now. And there's a lot of movies that I've actually seen this year where the leads have that goatee and I don't want people to pinpoint ten years from now, 20 years from now, 'Oh, that's a movie from 1994,' because that's when people were wearing shit like that." And not only that but I had a scene where John Travolta shows up for his date with Uma Thurman and she's come down with the video camera and does a little mini interview with it. And it's a funny little scene, but ultimately I got rid of it. One, it wasn't the greatest scene I ever wrote and, two, by that time in 1994, I think I'd seen three or four movies that had video confessionals in them, people pointing video cameras at other people, having them bare their souls. *Reality Bites* being one, *Kicking & Screaming*... and so that's why I got rid of that. And also, having 60s or 70s cars being mostly the cars, to give it this quality that this could have existed in a timeless area.

KM: *The Hateful Eight* is not timeless, but because there's a sometimes modern subtext to the characters, and timeless issues we're contending with today, it doesn't feel simply rooted in the past. Looking at people from the past, they often are more radical-looking than we think, in terms of appearance, especially people in the Old West...



Inglourious Basterds (2009)

Most of the really interesting characters in spaghetti westerns have a comic-book feel, as if they were drawn

QT: There definitely is that. There is a spaghetti western-ish patina to the characters, for lack of a better adjective. Most of the really interesting characters in the spaghetti western have a comic-book feel, as if they were drawn. And the costumes themselves have this comic-book artist kind of fetishistic quality to them. Then you think of how all of Leone's films and most of Sergio Corbucci's westerns were done by Carlo Sini, who was the costumer designer and the production designer, and he did the props. Can you imagine that the guy who came up with the Django costume and Angel Eyes' costume and the Man with No Name costume, he also found the circular graveyard in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* [1966] or that fucking rope bridge over the quicksand or the fucking muddy town in *Django* [1966]? I mean, what a genius. That level of work is almost unfathomable. I did show Courtney Hoffman, my costume designer, a bunch of Carlo Sini movies and she got it. The characters' costumes have to pop before the characters. With Sam Jackson that's easy because he comes with



Django Unchained (2012)

a big personality on his own. He fills out that batwing, yellow underlining just perfect [Laughs].

KM: In terms of actors, I know two of your favourites are Aldo Ray and Ralph Meeker. Is there anything about an actor, or those two guys in particular, that informs a cinematic aesthetic? Just an actor and a style, the world around them...

QT: Well, actually, literally in the case of Bruce Willis in *Pulp Fiction*, it did. What I liked about Bruce Willis is that he reminded me of a 50s leading man. He still has that quality now. He reminded me of a Ralph Meeker, Aldo Ray and Brian Keith kind of man. I went to his house and we did actually watch one print of an Aldo Ray movie, we watched *Nightfall* [1956].

KM: A great movie. And with an evil Brian Keith too. They have great banter in that movie.


QT: They have fantastic banter. And Brian Keith is excellent. I'm a big fan of him in all of his Phil Karlson movies too. With the rise of the great 70s leading man like Elliott Gould, Jack Nicholson, Donald Sutherland, Dustin Hoffman and George Segal, the one thing that took a hit were people like the Brian Keith leading man.

KM: Who are the actors you'd most have wanted to work with?

QT: Obviously, Ralph Meeker and Aldo Ray. Michael Parks, in his day. I worked with him but in his day would have been nice.



Crossing swords: Uma Thurman as The Bride in Kill Bill (2003)

 Robert Blake in his day. I would work with Robert Blake tomorrow, now would be nice too. I would have loved to work with Bette Davis in her day or out of her day. In the early 60s, in the 40s, 30s to *Burnt Offerings* [1976] time. All good. TV movie time. All good. I'd love to work with Al Pacino now; I just saw him in the new Mamet play and he was terrific. I might even want to work with him now even more than in his *Serpico* [1973] days. I would love to have Al Pacino rip-snorting through my dialogue.

KM: You're well-known for bringing new things out in actors or casting them in a unique way. For instance, I was happy to see Leonardo DiCaprio playing the villain Calvin Candie in *Django Unchained* because for so long I thought, he needs to play a psychopath. He needs to play a Tommy Udo *Kiss of Death* kind of guy...

QT: That would be good casting for him, Tommy Udo. That ended up being an interesting thing with Leonardo. One of the problems I might have when I'm writing a script is I'm thinking of an actor, but unfortunately I'm not always thinking about them as they are now. I'm maybe thinking about them 20 years ago and I'm not making the connection that they're not the same guy any more. So in a way, when I was writing Calvin Candie, I was writing it more for a Bruce Dern type. Not quite as old as Bruce Dern now, but maybe when he did *Diggstown* [1992], which is a magnificent performance from him. So, I'm writing it [that way] and then I heard Leo had read it and wanted to meet. That wasn't the way I had thought about it, but if he likes it that much, I'll meet him. So I met him and we talked about it and we had a really interesting conversation about it. But it's one of those things where you have to give it a couple of days. You're thinking, "OK. Am I just getting caught up in the idea? Because he's so handsome and I'm so flattered that he wants to do the movie that I'm gonna talk myself into it?" And that would be legit but I have to give enough time to let that wave move over. Or is it genuinely a good idea? And, so, if I did change it, how would that affect the material? And, in that instance, I thought it made the material deeper; it made it better. For the fact that now he's not just this old plantation guy that we've seen at least a few times. Now he's more an American Borgia, a petulant young prince who has become spoiled, rotted on the vine with his wealth. And his daddy's daddy's daddy was a cotton man. And his daddy's daddy was a cotton man. And his daddy was a cotton man. But he's not a cotton man. He's just this hedonistic, Caligula Borgia who can revel in his own vices because the Candie store runs itself by this point in time. And that was actually more interesting than the older plantation owner. That actually said more about America. It said more about the aristocracy of the South. And he was ferocious in it.

KM: We've mentioned 70s movies, where you feel like movies like that aren't made anymore. One movie from the 70s that I always find amazing did so well, given one famous disturbing sequence, is *Deliverance* [1972]... Could anyone make that film today? Like that?

QT: Oh, I know. I saw *Deliverance* in 1972 in a double feature with *The Wild Bunch* [1969] at the Tarzana Movies [in Los Angeles], the Tarzana Six,

Since 'Kill Bill' my films have taken a turn towards the literary and it would be nice to get back to the viscera

back when it was a big deal that six theatres were in one place. And recently I've been writing a piece of film writing, just for my own edification, and I've been going through some of the films and imagery I saw in 1970 and '71. So, in 1970, I saw, at the counterculture Tiffany Theater, at age eight, a double feature of *Joe* and *Where's Poppa?* That same year I saw a double feature of *The Owl and the Pussycat* and *The Diary of a Mad Housewife*. In 1970 I saw Richard Harris be hoisted by his nipples in *A Man Called Horse*. In 1970, I didn't see *Women in Love*, but I saw the trailer for *Women in Love* that had the naked wrestling match between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates. And in 1972, forget about all the things I saw in *The French Connection*, I saw the slow-motion bullet kills in *The Wild Bunch* only to see Ned Beatty fucked in the ass in *Deliverance*. [Laughs]

KM: Wow.

QT: That movie rocked my world as a kid. When I saw the butt-fucking scene in *Deliverance*, I didn't know what sodomy was, as a kid. What I did know was that he was being humiliated. And I did know those guys were fucking scary. That's what I knew. Well, I was right. He was being humiliated, he was being subjugated by really scary people who were imposing their will over him. That is what it was about. It wasn't about the sex. The one part that would freak adults out went over my head, but I actually got it. And that made me not want to go camping. [Laughs] But then the other part of the movie that blew my mind was that, in every way shape or form,

Burt Reynolds is set up to be the hero in the first 45 minutes, and he does fit that function during that encounter. But then shortly thereafter he's fucked up and that's it. He's completely useless.

KM: And then it's all up to Jon Voight...

QT: It's all up to Jon Voight. That's still one of the best movies ever made about, for lack of a better word, masculinity.

KM: That falls into the subject of violence and intense scenes in movies. There's a release when we watch violence and then there's a clutching horror many times that proves that viewers are actually not all desensitised to violence. There's this worry about desensitisation, but when viewers react strongly to violence or are angered by it, maybe that's good. They're not desensitised. Like with *Deliverance*, it's still shocking and scary and that's part of why it's so powerful.

QT: Yes. I realised how un-desensitised people are, especially watching movies at the New Beverly. And when they watch movies from different time periods that people haven't seen and they're not quite as used to the social mores of that time period and they're taken aback, like, "Whoa. What the fuck?"

KM: You really do create your own rules as a filmmaker. When I saw *Kill Bill* you were gloriously chucking out the rule book even harder. You've always done that...

QT: But that was it, the nth degree. I love *Kill Bill*. There is an aspect that I'd love to get back to, because I think that's my most visionary movie. But since then my films have taken a turn towards the literary and it would be nice to get back to the viscera.

KM: Yes. Again, your own rules. I can't really compare you to any director...

QT: But if you could, who would you compare to me to? In the last 20 years?



Hammer horror: Leonardo DiCaprio as the sadistic Calvin Candie in *Django Unchained*

KM: I can't think of anyone contemporary. The one director I see a brotherhood with, though, is Robert Aldrich because he could do tight smaller picture like *Kiss Me Deadly* [1955] and then he'd do an epic, irreverent movie like *The Dirty Dozen* [1967]. Like *Reservoir Dogs* to your Basterds.

QT: Well, I'm a student of Aldrich.

KM: You need to do a woman's picture then! Like his *Autumn Leaves* [1956].

QT: *The Killing of Sister George* [1968] for me. [Laughs]

KM: Or *The Legend of Lylah Clare* [1968]?

QT: Oh, I don't like that one. That's awful. Even I can't get through that one and I love Aldrich. I've tried. I keep trying. Every time it's on TCM I record it and I give it another attempt. [Laughs] But *The Killing of Sister George* I do love.

KM: Thinking of that movie, it taps into stylisation and what is considered realism, in both the filmmaking and with actors. But what does realism mean exactly anyway? This unyielding idea that there's one way to express realism.

QT: I actually think that talon grip on realism has loosened in the last ten or 15 years. One of the things that made me a fan of Kurt Russell was that he would do an Eastwood impersonation through the first half of *Escape from New York* [1981] and then he turns into Snake Plissken.

KM: He does something of a John Wayne in *The Hateful Eight*.

QT: He does a big John Wayne in *Big Trouble in Little China* [1986]. He does a little John Wayne in *The Hateful Eight*. He did it a lot in the script reading. We went back on that.

It comes out from time to time, but it comes out honestly. He was doing it a little too much in the script reading. But that was fine. That was him finding his rhythm and that rhythm worked great for that character. That was fantastic, him doing a bit of an Eastwood voice as Snake Plissken because acting shouldn't always just be an artistic representation of realism. There is a child at play quality; that's why they're called players. I remember asking Kurt, "What made you choose an Eastwood-esque voice for Snake Plissken?" You are going to love his answer. He said, "Well, I'm doing scenes with Lee Van Cleef. And so I knew that worked. There was a dynamic between the two of them that worked. I know Van Cleef's gonna work, so if I don't look at myself that way, Lee Van Cleef's gonna eat me alive. So if my young ass can fulfil that aspect of it, then I can keep my side of the see-saw up." That's a fucking great answer.

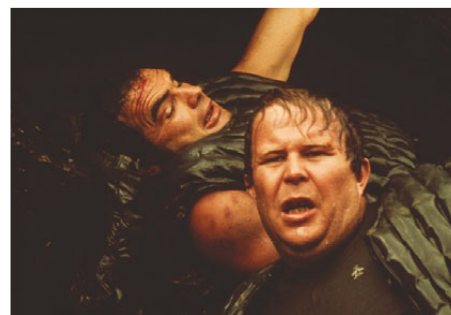
KM: And in this movie, you don't shy away from having stylised dialogue...

QT: It's very theatrical. It's absolutely theatrical. I contemplated doing it on stage at one point after I finished the script reading. And I might very well do it on stage after this whole thing is over with. I just have to go through this whole press thing and see how I feel about it. But that's always, frankly, been kind of the plan. We'll see, but it could happen. But if I was going to do it as a play, it would never leave Minnie's Haberdashery. I would start it with chapter five. So the play version would start with the mystery reveal.

KM: When I saw the live read I thought about old confinement movies, like Felix Feist's *The Threat* [1949] – the live read and the movie



Kurt Russell in *Escape from New York*



John Boorman's *Deliverance*

have also been compared with *Ten Little Indians* [1965] or *The Petrified Forest* [1936], which was originally a play. Did those influence any of this?

QT: I didn't watch *The Petrified Forest* again and I didn't rewatch *Key Largo* [1948]. But to tell you the truth, I did watch some B movies that could be considered plays. I watched *Shackout on 101* [1955], which plays like a twisted Eugene O'Neill.

KM: These would make great stage plays.

Why not remake some of these pictures as plays? Like *Detour* [1945] on stage?

QT: Absolutely. They would make great stage plays. I watched a lot of the movies that would be terrific plays. For instance, one spaghetti western could be done on stage. It takes place at a weird middle ground between a place like Minnie's Haberdashery and the place where they hang out at the beginning of *Once upon a Time in the West* [1968]. It's called *Shoot the Living and Pray for the*


'The Hateful Eight' is absolutely theatrical. I contemplated doing it on stage at one point and I might very still well do so

Dead [1971] with Klaus Kinski. It definitely has that interesting stage quality to it. Or something like *The Outcasts of Poker Flats*. But then also, it was very much influenced by 60s TV westerns. I also watched a lot of the TV westerns that had a home invasion kind of vibe. There's a *Virginian* episode where Darren McGavin and David Carradine take over the Shiloh Ranch and hold everybody hostage. And they did that once a season because they only had so many plots and they were on for 15 years so they had to keep recycling them. There was one line in that episode that was so fucking good. Darren McGavin shows up at the ranch, he ends up shooting a couple of people just to make his point, but one of them is the cook. And then he makes Betsy, Roberta Shore, make him some dinner. So he's at Lee Van Cleef's table and he's eating his food and he's talking shit, and then he finishes and he goes, "Wow. That meal was really unmemorable. Always remember: don't shoot the cook." [Laughs] That's a great line. ☺

i **The Hateful Eight** is released in UK cinemas on 8 January and is reviewed on page 77. A retrospective of Quentin Tarantino's films screens at the BFI Southbank, London, throughout January



Cabin fever: Kurt Russell and Jennifer Jason Leigh with Bruce Dern as General Smithers

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark traditional Chinese garment with a light-colored V-neck collar, is peering through a patterned curtain. The curtain has a gold floral and vine motif on a dark background. A red tassel hangs from the top of the curtain. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the woman's face and the textures of the fabric.

DRESSED TO KILL
Nie Yinniang (Shu Qi)
makes a secret foray inside
the home of her one-time
fiancé Lord Tian, whom she
has been sent to kill in Hou
Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin*



TAIPEI TANG

Many years in the making, 'The Assassin' is Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-Hsien's shot at the distinctively Chinese genre of the wuxia movie. But it defies expectations at every turn. So let's try to figure out what's really going on behind the film's sumptuous veil

By Tony Rayns

Non-specialists know little about the Tang Dynasty (c. 618-907 AD) except that it produced exquisitely refined art, including much of China's most enduring and resonant poetry. As it happens, a reading of poems by the Confucian Tu Fu, the Taoist Li Po and the Buddhist Wang Wei (all in Penguin Classics) would get you in exactly the right mood and frame of mind to enjoy *The Assassin* (*Cike Nie Yinniang*). Hou Hsiao-Hsien's only movie set in the ancient past has been trailed as a *wuxia* film – meaning a film in the Chinese 'martial chivalry' genre; a swordplay film – for as long as it's been in production, and it does contain the revenge motif and the flurries of action that are typical of the genre. But violence plays the smallest part in a poetic film that's essentially about the ways we struggle to understand antiquity. And like most of Hou's other films, it's also about the problem of grasping what people really think and feel.

Hou is not a historian, much less a specialist in Tang history, but when he remembered the short



➔ tale of a woman trained to be an assassin, written in the Tang Dynasty, first read when he was in high school, he saw it as a channel for his curiosity about the period. By his own account he'd felt a vague hankering to attempt a *wuxia* film, but the Tang itself was the main attraction. "I went into it with no specific ambitions or expectations," he told me during his visit to London in September 2015. "When I started, I researched the historical background and found out what I could about the lives of the ruling class and the common people. Then, when it came to drafting the script with Chu Tien-Wen [the novelist who has been Hou's main co-writer since the early 1980s; the *pinyin* spelling of her name is Zhu Tianwen], we followed the Japanese example, as usual. We went for historical 'realism', basing our scenes on what we'd learnt about everyday life back then."

Hou already knew what all educated Chinese know about the Tang: the famous poems, the tomb sculptures, the new cosmopolitanism in handicraft techniques, trading and culture; plus historical episodes such as the Minghuang emperor's infatuation with his concubine Yang (subject of a rather mediocre film by Mizoguchi and a rather better one by Li Hanxiang) and An Lushan's ultimately successful rebellion against the imperial court in Chang'an. He also knew that it was during the Tang that Heian Japan began importing Chinese culture wholesale: the form and style of government, the writing system, the esoteric Buddhist thought that became known in Japan as 'Zen' and much besides. The historical traffic from China to Japan proved useful in the early stages of getting the film financed: the Japanese major Shochiku expressed interest in co-financing on condition that there'd be a role for a Japanese star.

In the original Tang story, which runs to around three pages in modern reprints, Nie Yinniang is a high-born child who is taken from her home to be trained in the arts of killing. She carries out two assassinations (both victims are deserving) and is then returned to her family. The psychological fall-out from her time as a professional hit-woman is not explored. Her story is rooted in a particular political-military moment; the details became clearer as Hou researched it. "The off-screen movements of troops and the jockeying for political power and influence are all true," Hou explains, "but they're not in the story. We made up several key bits of back-story to account for what happens to her. For example, we made her Princess Jiacheng's daughter and we invented the idea that her intended fiancé Tian Ji'an was snatched away from her for the sake of a politically expedient marriage. The story doesn't say either that she and Tian Ji'an were betrothed to each other in their youth. But there are plenty of other Tang stories in which such things are recorded, so we weren't just pulling them out of the air."

The film (ultimately credited to four writers, including the mainland novelist Zhong Acheng, who has previously worked on scripts for Tian Zhuangzhuang and Chen Kaige) starts with Nie Yinniang (Shu Qi) carrying out the first of her assassinations on the orders of the Taoist nun Jiaxin, the twin sister of her late mother Jiacheng and hence her aunt. She's then seen *failing* to complete her second assignment (her intended victim is playing with his child), and Jiaxin punishes her for retaining sentimental feelings by sending her to the capital of Weibo Province with orders to kill its ruler Tian Ji'an, her



Much of the film's dialogue has a deliberately antique flavour. I asked Hou if this was how people actually spoke in Tang China. His answer was wry and very concise: 'Who knows?'

one-time fiancé (Chang Chen). The main body of the film details Yinniang's eavesdropping forays into Lord Tian's home, observing his life with his pregnant concubine Huji and their children. She also sees the hostile machinations of Lord Tian's jealous first wife, who employs the services of a black magician to attack Huji, and of court advisors who oppose Tian's challenges to the authority of the emperor in distant Chang'an. It's not much of a spoiler to reveal that she decides not to kill Tian Ji'an; her final clashes are with her own mentor Jiaxin.

I helped Hou with the film's English subtitles, and when I visited the Spot Films office in Taipei in April 2015 to check the work against the cut readied for Cannes my first question was about the language heard in the film. Much of the dialogue has a deliberately antique flavour and it's loaded with traditional 'four-character phrases' (Chinese mottoes, more or less), which distil wisdom into pithy, poetic analogies. We tried to give the subtitles an equivalent patina of age, using old-fashioned locutions and still-comprehensible words that evoke the past. I asked Hou if this was how people actually spoke in Tang China. His answer was wry and very concise: "Who knows?"

Although much of Hou's cinema is about the present and recent past, he's made several films set in periods before he was born: *A City of Sadness* (Beiqing Chengshi, 1989), his masterpiece *The Puppetmaster* (Xi Meng Ren-sheng, 1993), *Flowers of Shanghai* (Hai Shang Hua, 1998), and parts of *Good Men, Good Women* (Hao Nan Hao Nü, 1995) and *Three Times* (Zuihao de Shiguang, 2005). His usual method when shooting something of which he has no first-hand experience or memory is to research it very fully. He reads the literature of the period, ploughs through the historical record and checks the surviving visual traces, painted and photographic. All of that happened when he began thinking about *The Assassin* some seven years ago, but there was a wild card in play: the *wuxia* genre.

Hou is no more expert in *wuxia* movies than he is in the Tang Dynasty: when I asked him about King Hu's groundbreaking films of the 1960s and 1970s, he remembered little about them. But he grew up reading martial arts novels and watching martial arts movies and, like many Chinese directors, had the feeling that it might one

day be fun to try his hand at the genre. The reality proved to be less fun than he expected; he was shocked by the physical demands made on his lead actors by the fight scenes and the wire work and told me he found he didn't have it in him to make films "like that". No doubt that's why there are relatively few action scenes in *The Assassin*, but *wuxia* conventions do inflect the film in other ways.

Wuxia movies are traditionally set in the *jianghu*, a mythic parallel universe with its own codes and laws of physics, in which gender identities are sometimes fluid and both quests and swordfights generally have a philosophical or spiritual dimension. (The name *jianghu* literally means 'rivers and lakes'; the term is also used in Hong Kong movies as a cypher for the debased world in which modern Triad gangs fight for supremacy.) *The Assassin* dips in and out of the *jianghu*. When Lord Tian catches Nie Yinniang in his chambers and chases her, both of them leaping up to the rooftop for an armed clash, we're in the *jianghu*. Equally when Nie Yinniang tries to break with her mentor Jiaxin, both of them posed on cliff tops in an image straight out of a Taoist painting, we're in the *jianghu*. And when Lord Tian tells his concubine Huji the famous story of the King of Kophen's bluebird – it failed to sing until it saw its own image in a mirror; then it sang and danced until it died – well, that's also a point of entry into the *jianghu*. Tian later clarifies that the story of the bluebird, sung by Jiacheng, was an analogy for Jiacheng's own fate when she was ordered to leave the capital to marry the then Lord of Weibo – the emperor's strategy for keeping Weibo's rebellious tendencies in check. Elsewhere,



though, the film is grounded in Hou's characteristic sense of everyday realities.

The ninth-century China of the late Tang was politically unstable, and Weibo was indeed one of the states which challenged the precarious rule of the Tang emperor. It's also true that the ruler of a neighbouring state was cajoled into ceding land on the border with Weibo to the emperor, and that the emperor promptly built a military garrison on it. The script speculates that Lord Tian had an *agent provocateur* trying to stir up conflicts between neighbour states to weaken them, but such machi-

AN UPHILL BATTLE

Hou Hsiao-Hsien (opposite) was shocked by the physical toll the fight scenes took on his actors, such as the one below between Jiaxin (Fang-Yi Sheu) and Nie Yinniang (Shu Qi); Lord Tian, the ruler of Weibo Province, played by Chang Chen (above)





'The Assassin' may be light on action, but it internalises the spirit of wuxia movies to present the ancient past as a world we can observe but never fully comprehend

ALIEN RESURRECTION
The reconstruction of life in the Weibo court (top) and the political backstory feel no less 'alien' to a 21st-century viewer than the ninja-like skills of weightlessness shown by Nie Yinniang (above)

nations are less significant in themselves than the film's depiction of the workings of Lord Tian's court, with advisors formally arguing different positions and strategies; Tian is supposed to listen and arbitrate between them, but is shown to be an impatient and impulsive man who has already made his own decisions. The average Chinese viewer will be aware that a rebellion against the central power much like the one that Tian wishes for actually did topple the emperor not many years later.

The vulnerability of Weibo to attack is explicitly one of the factors that deters Nie Yinniang from killing Lord Tian, but most of her other thoughts and motivations remain unvoiced. As in many of his other films, Hou declines to 'explain' his protagonist, leaving us to infer what's going on in her head from watching how she moves and behaves. (One Taiwanese critic has suggested, amusingly, that Yinniang is Hou's self-portrait: standing apart from the crowd, going her own way, mostly watching.) The character's opaqueness is in sync with the film's general sense that the remote past is essentially unknowable. Hou's researches allow him to show us how members of the Tang ruling class spent their days, dressed, bathed, played with their children and treated their wounds; he also provides more speculative glimpses of

the ways that farmers, soldiers and servants lived. But the meticulous reconstruction of everyday life in the Weibo court and the attention to the political backstory feel no less 'alien' to a 21st-century viewer than ninja-like skills of concealment and weightlessness do. It's as if Hou sees the Tang Dynasty as another kind of *jianghu*, a past where many things are done differently.

Hou thinks very carefully about subjective point-of-view shots, using them very sparingly in the context of his trademark wide-angle shots of people moving through interior and exterior spaces. Exhibit A would be *Flowers of Shanghai*, which describes another vanished world (the closed 'flower houses' of Shanghai on the cusp of the last century) in long takes defined by their opiated languor, disrupted by just one crucial point-of-view shot of an act of sexual betrayal. The equivalent here is the scene where Yinniang first slips into Lord Tian's residence in the Weibo court to watch and listen to his private conversation with his concubine. The murky interior is lit by candles and barely shielded from the outdoor breezes by 'walls' of billowing lace hangings. We observe the scene through Yinniang's eyes, and the long-held shot quickly becomes hallucinatory: the murmur of half-heard voices, the flickering of the candles, the undulations of the lace concealing more than they reveal. The shot is such an oneiric *tour de force* that Hou gets away with giving us the reverse angle, showing us that the eavesdropper is Yinniang; the shot of her watching is almost identical with her point-of-view shot, although nobody is watching her.

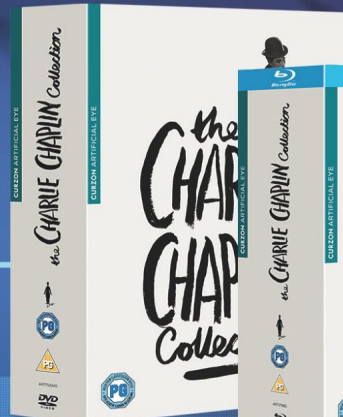
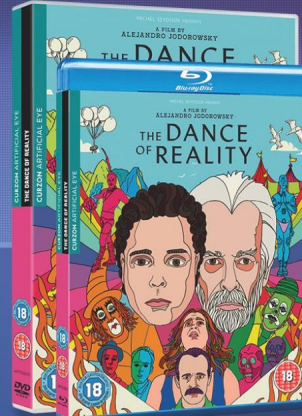
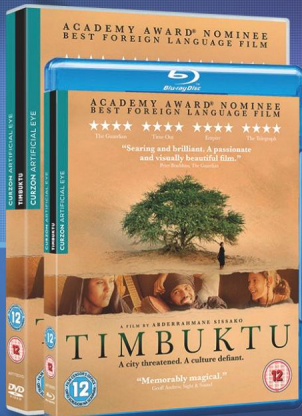
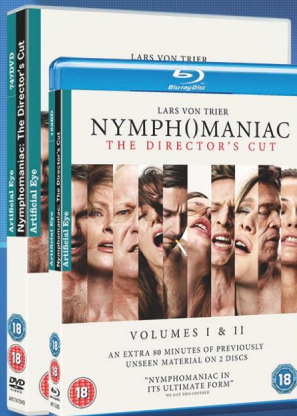
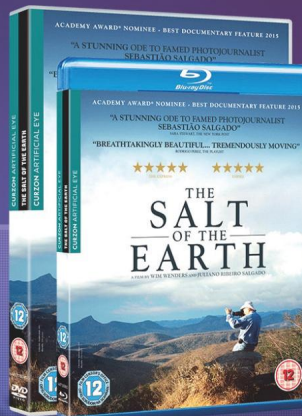
Hou is right, of course. Nobody knows how either high-born or low-born people spoke and conducted their lives in Tang China. *The Assassin* may be light on the visceral thrills of action scenes, but – in something of a conceptual coup – it internalises the spirit of *wuxia* movies to present the ancient past as a world that we can observe but never fully comprehend. Hou starts the film with scenes in monochrome and Academy ratio (they were shot on a wind-up Bolex 16mm camera!), as if to suggest that the entire project is a form of cinematic archaeology, and then shifts to colour and widescreen for his dreamlike panorama of an 'alien' world. The result redefines the very notion of speculative fiction.

A footnote. *Shochiku finally backed out of co-financing 'The Assassin', although it stayed on board as the film's distributor in Japan. By then, its demand that a Japanese star be featured had already resulted in the casting of Tsumabuki Satoshi as the 'mirror polisher' of the Weibo court, a role that obviously relates to the story of the bluebird and the mirror. In the internationally released version of the film, though, Hou has reduced Tsumabuki's part to just one scene: as a member of military commander Tian Xing's retinue when Lord Tian sends him to the border, the mirror polisher witnesses Nie Yinniang foiling an attempted ambush and is then seen dressing her wounds and gazing at her adoringly. This brief, wordless appearance was not enough to satisfy Tsumabuki's fans in Japan, and so Hou agreed to restore a deleted flashback, showing him with his wife and family in Japan before he left for China. The Japanese release is consequently about five minutes longer than the cut released elsewhere. It's not hard to predict that the upcoming Japanese Blu-ray will become a collector's item. ☺*

i The Assassin is released in UK cinemas on 22 January and is reviewed on page 68

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A WORLD APART

The source novel for Lenny Abrahamson's 'Room' might have been partly inspired by the horrific Josef Fritzl case in Austria, but don't be deceived into thinking the film is a harrowing exposé of human evil – instead, it's a fable that allows us to relive the innocence of childhood

By Trevor Johnston

So where do you go after you've made a film about an alternative rock musician spending his life inside an oversized papier-mâché head? Irish director Lenny Abrahamson has never been one to take the easy route, so he's followed *Frank* (2014) with *Room*, an adaptation of Emma Donoghue's acclaimed 2010 novel about a young mother held captive for years in a suburban shed, where she tries to make the best life for the young son fathered by her prisoner. Echoing, and indeed partly inspired by the Josef Fritzl case in Austria, here's another story which seems like the definition of a hard sell, and though strong critical notices made the book a surprise bestseller, Abrahamson himself admits that bringing its



BOY WONDER
Until he met Jacob Tremblay (right), Lenny Abrahamson (above) was concerned he might not be able to find an actor who was mature enough to play the part of Jack, yet young enough to persuade the audience of his innocent capacity for fantasy

challenging material to the screen has been “the riskiest thing I’ve ever done”.

A lot of that’s due to the difference between celluloid and the written word. “Literature has the advantage of just not talking about the stuff it doesn’t want to talk about,” says Abrahamson, who’s worked steadily since 2004’s micro-budget Dublin junkie saga *Adam & Paul* and now stands five films into the most significant body of work to emerge in post-millennial British and Irish independent cinema. “Then you turn the camera on, and suddenly there’s no getting away from it, everything is there. The worry was that the reality of the room, the griminess of it would be so emotionally overwhelming that it would kill any of the allegorical aspects which really drew Emma and myself to the material. Because what we just weren’t interested in were the true-crime aspects of the whole thing.”

On this point, don’t let yourself be deceived by any one-line synopsis into pegging *Room* as some harrowing exposé of human iniquity. It’s not a spoiler, for instance, to reveal that Brie Larson’s Ma and the extraordinary Jacob Tremblay as her young son Jack do manage to escape their confinement, something the film’s trailer purposefully makes clear, while also suggesting the dramatic possibilities of their daunting transition from enclosed universe into the whole wide world. In a way, the viewer’s experience mirrors the boy’s experience in the story, since the narrative guides us to the realisation that *Room* is so much bigger and more resonant than we might have imagined. While it certainly touches on the darkest aspects of the adult world, in the



end it's a fable which allows us to relive the innocence of childhood and reconnect with the resilience of a parental bond. Having won the prestigious audience award at Toronto, it also looks likely – via audiences, critical approval and awards voters – to bring Abrahamson the broadest worldwide exposure his work has gained to date.

And yet when he first read the novel in 2010, after it was already selling well in the US and attracting Hollywood attention, the likelihood that he would get hold of the film rights looked slim. For one thing, his filmography at that point consisted of two modest Irish productions – the aforementioned *Adam & Paul*, and *Garage* (2007), a mesmerising portrait of a seemingly cheery, mentally challenged small-town petrol station attendant which remains his most piercingly original piece. Moreover, the very fact that Donoghue was a fellow Dubliner who'd since moved to Canada, somehow wasn't the best omen. "I know what Irish people are like when they go away," he says, smiling ruefully, on the latest leg of an autumn press tour that's taken him from Telluride to Toronto and now the BFI London Film Festival. "They don't want to go back. They want to wave like some big Hollywood director back at you from the other side of the Atlantic... but thankfully Emma wasn't as shallow as me."

What helped win over the author, who eventually penned the film's screenplay in an apparently harmonious working partnership, was a letter Abrahamson wrote to her after he'd finished reading the book. "It was more in hope than expectation, and when I think back, a lot of it was probably just to do with getting it out of my system," Abrahamson continues. "The really moving thing for me was that Emma understood the way children process the darker things in the adult world which their parents can never quite successfully shield them from. It's that incredible optimism kids cling on to. It kills me. I see it in my own children, it reminds me of my own childhood, and also, because I'm of that cast of mind, it has me imagining some of the things I'll have to introduce to my own children when they get older – and some of the things they'll have to confront for themselves."

Donoghue, as it turned out, had seen and liked both *Adam & Paul* and *Garage*, and really responded to Abrahamson's letter, but it was only after the release of his subsequent drama *What Richard Did* (2012), when he was in development with *Frank*, that the possibility of finding a home at Film4 for *Room* finally got novelist and filmmaker together to work on an adaptation. Even then, it was by no means a given that their labours would ever come before the camera. "If I'm being absolutely honest about it now, the only one I would have confessed to was Ed Guiney, my longtime producer and confidant, that I just didn't know if we would find the boy. You've got a script, you set a shooting date, but you start casting with no certainty that you'll find a child young enough for the audience to believe that he could still live in that bubble of fantasy inside the shed, but also mature enough to play the part, and essentially carry the film."

Enter master Jacob Tremblay, a seven-year-old from Vancouver with an acting resumé that included *The Smurfs 2*. Abrahamson cast him as Jack, the beguiling innocent who says good morning to every little bit of furniture in the shabby outhouse which is all he's ever known, a child living in a comforting fiction Larson's Ma



has created to shield him from the awful reality of her ongoing ordeal at the hands of her controlling captor (known to them only as 'Old Nick'). Larson's experience as a former child actress proved significant, since while delivering a striking performance herself, she still had the facility to snap in and out of character at will and look after her junior co-star.

As the first week's shooting commenced inside the shed, however, all was not well. "I worked out that when he was goofing off in too many takes it was a displacement device," recalls Abrahamson. "Actually, he was anxious about an upcoming scene where he had to yell at Brie because she didn't have candles for his birthday cake. Eventually he whispered to me, 'I don't want to shout at her because shouting's rude.' Terribly sweet, but it made me realise that he was still just this little kid." Quick thinking, though, brought a swiftly arranged shouting competition involving the whole crew, allowing Tremblay to relax that bit more into his role. Thus Abrahamson helped kickstart a process in which his leading man honed his craft as the shoot progressed towards even more demanding scenes later in the schedule.

EMOTIONAL RESCUE

It's hard to overstate how much the sheer believability of Tremblay's performance allows the audience to empathise in the moment with the boy's plight, while also bringing their own memories of what it means to have, and to have lost, that kind of indefatigable innocence. Perhaps unexpectedly, the film's potent emotional impact actually kicks in during the second half, where, as Jack tentatively establishes a new bond with his loving yet slightly flummoxed grandma (Joan Allen, so palpably present it hurts), we can see that despite all he's been through, he still remains a lively, resolutely ordinary little boy who likes cake and doggies and playing with Lego. It all sounds so mundane when you describe it, but watching it hits with an almost primal force that's difficult to explain. Masterly filmmaking, to be sure, has much to do with it.

Before that can unfold however, a pivotal moment is the point of escape and a seemingly miraculous shot in which Jack, having previously only seen out through a

IN A LONELY PLACE
Brie Larson's Ma (above, with Jack) tries to make the best life she possibly can for her son to shield him from the awful reality of their ongoing ordeal at the hands of their captor 'Old Nick'

murky skylight, looks up and registers the full expanse of the heavens with an expression of guileless wonder which will stay with everyone who sees the film. A look, it's fair to say, that took every ounce of Abrahamson's directorial cunning to achieve, filming in the studio on a truck being shaken about by sundry burly grips, while the cameraman blew air across the young actor's face. Abrahamson takes up the story: "If you just stand there saying, 'OK, Jake, it's the first time you've ever seen the world', what's a seven-year-old meant to do with that information? So the whole thing becomes sculptural, about regulating his breathing and what his eyes are focusing on. But just as you're eliciting this performance, you somehow have to be looking at it fresh enough to recognise the moment when it actually feels real. That's tough. Did you get it? Would you know if you did?"

Hearing him talk about such production details underlines one of the key strengths of Abrahamson's filmography, its absolute understanding that the devil is in the details, whether that means getting note-perfect contributions from a whole spectrum of performers, or working through the entire panoply of production and sound design to shape the tonality of any given instant, thus achieving a desired, often surreptitious emotional effect on the viewer. From the composed rural desolation of *Garage* to the oppressive smugness of leafy South Dublin suburbia in *What Richard Did* and the amazing rural recording retreat as dramatic crucible that's played out in *Frank*, he's pretty impeccable when it comes to faces, places and spaces. What's different in the claustrophobic first half of *Room*, however, is a telling sense that he's letting his directorial grip go and surrendering to the moment, the camera sometimes struggling to keep up with the apparent spontaneity of Jack's moods and Ma's watchful attempts to protect him.


"There's no sense here, like there is elsewhere in my work, that you're in my hands now," Abrahamson explains. "The implied narrator is much more naive. It's about 'what's happening here?' Not inflecting the story, but making the viewer feel that we've just encountered these people. That changes completely in the second half, when we get to Joan Allen's very arranged house, which is all much more classically filmed. Really, it's through that contrast where people find emotional resonances with their own childhood, and it's completely unpredictable where those emotional beats will hit."

Indeed, *Room*'s almost binary narrative and stylistic

construction shows Abrahamson's formal endeavour at its most confident, as if his craft has just shifted up a gear, underlining the sense that for all his accomplishments to date, he may just be getting going. In critical terms, though, he's not the easiest filmmaker to pin down (or indeed compare with others), since each distinctive project seems to wander down its own avenue, and he appears to be more taken with the spaces between genres than in cleaving to or reworking familiar narrative formulae. That said, he's evidently fascinated by the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between ourselves and existential outliers like troubled artist Frank or Pat Shortt's unforgettable Josie in *Garage*, which seems connected to a certain refusal of first-person perspective in favour of a more challenging distance on his material.

"It's always seemed to me that you get the most limited view of a situation when you're actually inside it, so I've resisted the idea that what you're doing in a film is to get the audience to identify with the protagonist. What's profound about cinema, especially in its European tradition, is that you can look in from outside and really test the degree to which you can empathise with a whole array of different people, precisely because – though it's an awful expression – you've got no skin in the game."

He will admit, though, that *Room* certainly moves the goalposts. "I've never made a film so radically connected to a single point of view. It works in this case because it lets you participate in what the boy's going through – and you simply can't underestimate the degree to which audiences will invest in the plight of a child – but then also lets you step back from that. It's subjective in the sense that information is scarce and we're trying to piece it together as much as the boy does, but our own grown-up perspective from outside of Jack is also really important. We're always moving in and out, because it's the space between what he understands and what we know of the world as an adult audience where the emotion in the film lies."

At which point, he pauses for a moment to ponder if he should say what he's about to say. Impulsively, he starts up again: "I don't know how this is going to sound, but here it is anyway. It's sort of a love letter to my son. I'm amazed by him, not because he's some extraordinary creature, but because he's this... boy. And to be able to celebrate that in a film definitely makes *Room*, for me, the most emotionally satisfying thing I've done." 



Room is released in UK cinemas on 15 January and is reviewed on page 85

I've never made a film so radically connected to a single point of view, but you can't underestimate the degree to which audiences will invest in the plight of a child

BREAKING FREE
Ma and Jack enjoy the benefits of life after captivity (below left), while Joan Allen's Nancy and William H. Macy's Robert are overwhelmed with relief at their daughter's return (below right)



NOTES ON A SCANDAL

A dramatisation of the Boston Globe's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2002 exposé of child abuse in the Catholic Church, Tom McCarthy's gripping 'Spotlight' eschews grand theatrics and stylistic frills in favour of a detailed examination of the painstaking processes of journalistic investigation

By Philip Concannon



Long before he made *Spotlight*, Tom McCarthy was used to people associating him with the world of journalism. In the fifth series of HBO's *The Wire* he played Scott Templeton, an ambitious and unscrupulous reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* who found success with fabricated stories while his more honest colleagues were being squeezed out by budget cuts. This fact, which McCarthy admits has "come up a few times" during the press tour for his latest film as a director, puts him in the unusual position of representing the worst and best of American journalism in less than a decade. While Templeton's behaviour made him one of the show's most widely loathed characters, even among a line-up of drug dealers and murderers, *Spotlight's* portrait of real-life reporters focuses on the dogged pursuit of hard facts that resulted in the *Boston Globe's* Pulitzer-winning 2002 story on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

Despite that stint in David Simon's newsroom, this is seemingly unlikely material for McCarthy. His career as a filmmaker has been built upon his own original screenplays, with *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Visitor* (2007), *Win Win* (2011) and last year's critically mauled

The Cobbler all marked by a particular comic sensibility. Nevertheless, he believes there is a thematic link between *Spotlight* and his earlier work. "Maybe the connection is the outsider – that's something I've dealt with in all of my films, whether it's into a new community or in his own world," he says. "Hearing this initial story about [editor] Marty Baron coming to the *Globe* and entering not only the workplace but a culture in Boston where he was seen as an outsider for a long time, until he made his name and his place there, that grabbed me – how bold he was in his decision-making when he arrived, that was really compelling."

Baron (superbly underplayed by Liev Schreiber) was appointed editor of the *Globe* in July 2001 and on his first day suggested that the paper's special investigative team, *Spotlight*, should follow up on a recent article about a priest whose molestation case had been sealed by a court order. Baron is a West Coast Jew and the film suggests that he was the only person at the newspaper capable of standing outside Boston's staunchly Catholic community and pointing out a problem that appeared to be hidden in plain sight, unafraid of how many feathers he would ruffle. The subsequent investigation took the best part of six months, with the reporters pushed by Baron to expose not only a few errant priests but a whole network of abuse, along with the institutional practices that had been put in place to protect the guilty parties.

To tell this story, McCarthy and his co-writer Josh Singer (who had just finished working on Bill Condon's 2013 WikiLeaks film *The Fifth Estate*) had to do some investigative work of their own. There was no source material in the form of a book or article from which to adapt the screenplay, so they had to start from scratch. "It was hours and hours of interviews and conversations and reading, as much as we could consume over the first six months, until we were ready to start putting together an outline and getting a sense of the spine of the story," he says. "That was a lot of fun, it was really interesting, it felt like detective work, and we were pushing not only in the sense of information but also character and theme." Their investigation even turned up things the reporters had missed, with an article about abuse that *Spotlight* chief Walter 'Robby' Robinson (Michael Keaton) had overlooked being incorporated into the film to show how the *Globe* had previously been as guilty as anyone in its failure to act sooner. "It speaks to the larger theme of the film, of societal deference and complicity, and that on some level includes the *Globe* – maybe their complacency if not their complicity. That's what every reporter fears most. How do you maintain that objectivity when you live and work in this community?"

A lapsed Catholic who spent a year living in Boston as an undergraduate, McCarthy was determined to maintain a sense of objectivity in his approach as a filmmaker too. The most frequently cited filmic reference point for *Spotlight* has been Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), but whereas that film is celebrated for its aesthetic qualities – notably Gordon Willis's carefully sculpted shadows – and its suspenseful atmosphere, *Spotlight* lacks a definable visual style. McCarthy says this was a conscious decision. "I've always believed that I have to remain faithful to the material and let that be my guide, visually and tonally, and sometimes that means taking a step back stylistically. Not every filmmaker agrees, some of them assert their style – I don't share that philosophy. The material has to dictate it to some degree, or the story or the world."

What's even more striking about *Spotlight* is



HOLD THE FRONT PAGE
Michael Keaton (left, and with Mark Ruffalo, below), plays Walter 'Robby' Robertson, from the *Boston Globe's* investigative unit, *Spotlight*, which also includes Rachel McAdams's Sacha Pfeiffer (top)



how little effort it makes to generate drama external to the central narrative. We get very little characterisation beyond seeing these people at work, there are no flashbacks to children being lured by predatory priests and there are no big scenes of emotional catharsis. One brief shot of a worried looking Mike Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo) watching as a group of children sing *Silent Night* in a church is as close as the film ever comes to an emotionally manipulative moment.

This adherence to the facts is admirable and refreshing, and the film does develop a gripping momentum through Tom McArdle's nimble editing and the rigorous commitment to journalistic process. There is something quietly enthralling about watching a story like this come together, seeing the painstaking and distinctly unglamorous work of trawling through dusty archives and combing directories for clues gradually building into a scoop that reaches far beyond the scope of the reporters' expectations. McCarthy disagrees that the film is a 'David v Goliath' story, pointing out that the *Globe* was a formidable paper in 2001, arguably at the height of its powers, but there is something undeniably irresistible and inspiring about watching this small band of honest pros taking on an institution as vast, powerful and clandestine as the Catholic Church.

When the emotional beats do land in *Spotlight*, they do so as an organic part of the story, and they emerge primarily through the interviews that Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) conducts with the victims of abuse decades after the crimes were committed. "It was always my concern, even though we're dealing with child abuse, that the film might lack an emotional value, because the informational value of the film was so overwhelming," McCarthy says. "The engine of the film feels like a procedural, but the heart of it feels like the stories of those survivors." These short but potent encounters between reporter and survivor paint a damning portrait of the complicity, unquestioning faith and wilful ignorance that left so many children at the mercy of the Church. One survivor recalls his mother laying out cookies for the cardinal when he came to their house to placate her after the boy reported being molested, while another describes the pressure to keep silent that came not from the Church authorities but from other parishioners. When Sacha asks one of her subjects if he ever considered talking to anyone about what had happened to him, he scoffs in response, "Like who? A priest?" and it doesn't go unnoticed that a church looms silently in the background as they have this conversation. "It's something we really need to remind the audience of, that this was a time when leaving your children with the church really was the best possible solution," McCarthy explains, "especially if you didn't have the resources to take care of them in any other way, as most of these people didn't."

There's no question that the abuse happened in a different time, but *Spotlight* also feels like a period piece in other ways. Although the *Globe* investigation took place less than 15 years ago, McCarthy tells me that a number of journalists have described *Spotlight* to him as feeling like a dispatch from a bygone age. You could draw a line between this film and *The Fifth Estate*, perhaps going via *The Wire*'s Templeton, to chart the changing face of news media in the 21st century. The internet is a spectre

It's quietly enthralling watching a story like this come together, seeing the reporters' painstaking work build into a scoop that reaches far beyond their expectations

in this film – McCarthy describes it as "the smoke in the distance" – and while we see an AOL billboard outside the *Globe* offices, and a few reporters talk about adding URLs to their stories, journalists in 2001 had little sense of how completely this new form of communication would transform their world. "The one thing we missed an opportunity to do was to acknowledge within the confines of the movie that this type of journalism – fully funded, very operational and with seemingly unlimited resources – rarely exists today," he says. "We kept thinking about how to address this, and really the only way to do it is to show a great example of high-end journalism and keep talking about it afterwards. It felt too editorial to try to include it in the film."

So is *Spotlight* a lament for a lost era of journalism, or a reminder of how vital and integral it can still be? "I've heard a lot about the film hopefully motivating a wave of new young journalists, but it's got to do more than that," he says. "It has to inspire innovators to come up with new models for journalism, because there needs to be a place for these people to go to work." McCarthy recognises that there are investigative websites doing strong work online, and newspapers like the *New York Times* that can still invest in longform investigations, but *Spotlight* is also a rallying cry for the importance of local papers; after all, as McCarthy likes to recall, Watergate began with two metro reporters covering a hotel break-in. "It's all the smaller metro dailies and community newspapers where a lot of things are uncovered and we can't let that institution continue to diminish and disappear. Hopefully there will be a renaissance of sorts – there needs to be." ☺

i *Spotlight* is released in UK cinemas on 29 January and is reviewed on page 87

SUPER MODELS
Director Tom McCarthy (below) hopes *Spotlight* will do more than simply inspire a new wave of reporters, and encourage innovators to come up with new models to enable investigative journalism to survive



PHOTOGRAPH BY ETEVINE

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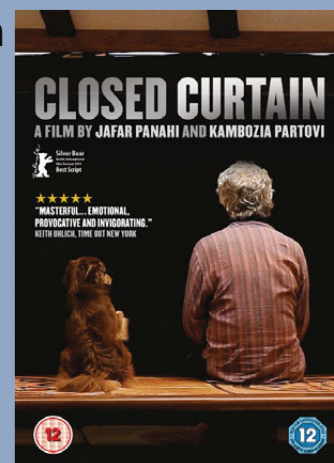
Guy Lodge, The Standard

Closed Curtain

Jafar Panahi and Kambozia Partovi

Two people barricade themselves in a secluded villa. Are we looking at outlaws, or are they merely phantoms, figments of the imagination of a filmmaker who is no longer allowed to work? Jafar Panahi's second film made whilst under a ban from making films, and co-directed by Kambozia Partovi (who also acts in the film), is a demonstration of the indomitability of artistic endeavour and freedom wrapped in a multi-layered form where illusion and reality change places with dizzying results.

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Keith Uhlich, Time Out



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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

With a new miniseries of 'The X-Files' set to air, it's time to remind ourselves that for all the pleasures of its preposterous labyrinthine narrative, the real key to the show's success is the deep emotional sustenance provided by Mulder and Scully's relationship itself

By Keith Uhlich

It is, quite simply, a love story. You can sense that, the moment fledgling FBI Special Agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) walks into the basement office of her soon-to-be-partner Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) in the original pilot episode of the long-running science-fiction series *The X-Files*. Scully comes through the door with the expectant look of an eager young go-getter; she's going to make this work even though her superiors have tasked her with debunking her colleague's investigations into paranormal and extraterrestrial phenomena. And when the obsessive Mulder, hunched feverishly over a slide table, turns to meet her gaze, an emotional circuit completes. "Who's this now?" he seems to be thinking, his lightheartedly brusque stoicism (a Duchovny staple) cracking ever so subtly. Though neither character realises it, this is going to be a journey for the ages.

When that pilot first aired, at 9pm on 10 September 1993, nobody had reason to expect that its own journey would last almost nine years and include two movies – not to mention a new six-part miniseries, which premieres on 24 January. The executives at Fox, the show's home network, were more enamoured of its 8pm lead-in, *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.*, a sci-fi western starring Sam Raimi muse Bruce Campbell as a steampunkish bounty hunter. Yet ultimately it was this strangely invigorating *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*-inspired mix of government paranoia, conspiracy theory, alien abduction, religious mysticism and slow-burn melodrama – the brainchild of 35-year-old former *Surfing* magazine reporter Chris Carter – that caught on with critics and audiences alike, going from a cult item to a zeitgeisty blockbuster... and back again.

Ask people about *The X-Files* and it's likely they'll fondly recall the earlier years while dismissing the later

ones. The break-up points are never entirely the same. For some it was when the series stopped filming in atmospherically misty Vancouver and moved production to sun-baked Los Angeles. For others it was the moment, different for everyone, when the show's overarching narrative (which dealt with the alien colonisation of Earth, but was interrupted for large portions of each season by a number of standalone 'Monster of the Week' episodes) became too convoluted for its own good. For still others, it was after season seven, when Duchovny split, frustrated by the rigorous filming schedule and angry with Fox for holding out on profits, appearing in only half the episodes of season eight and one instalment of season nine; those years showcased a new pair of agents, John Doggett (Robert Patrick) and Monica Reyes (Annabeth Gish), toward whom many fans were decidedly ambivalent, if not outright hostile. Multiple answers, none of them definitive – kind of like an X-File.

But reactions cut the other way, too. In the run-up to the new series a few devoted X-Philes (the official moniker for fans) have voiced their appreciation for the latter seasons. Some have even spoken of their love of the much maligned second theatrical feature, *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), which was more concerned with intimately scrutinising the Mulder-Scully relationship than providing 'closure' to the labyrinthine narrative that Carter and his collaborators devised, not always elegantly, over a labour-intensive decade. Though mainstream appeal has waned, the cult persists.

For a number of reasons, I'm one of those who proselytise for the series *in toto* – peaks, valleys and plateaux. One among many: *The X-Files*'s fascinating role in blurring the line between cinema and television – always a touchy subject, especially at a time when so many think-piece writers and social media posters sound off defensively about how *TV is so good now*.

In the mid-80s and early 90s, shows such as *Miami Vice* and *Twin Peaks* brought to American television a unique aesthetic sensibility, always eye-catching and at best profoundly evocative, that seemed closer to the silver screen than their predecessors. *The X-Files* built on their example. In several interviews Carter has talked about how he and his creative team approached each episode like a movie. Though the average shooting schedule was only eight days, Carter and his producers ceded as much creative leeway to the writers, directors, special effects artists and other key crew as possible. Admirable in some respects and quixotic in others, this meant

THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH
The new miniseries of *The X-Files* (right) sees Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) drawn back into action by a conservative newsman who insists he has the real facts behind the alien conspiracy





that the team had to work long hours over eleven-and-a-half months to produce between 20 and 25 such instalments per season. (And Carter has also said that if he wasn't thinking about the following season during his annual two-week holiday, he'd already be behind when he came back to work.)

Given these factors, it's incredible that the show's quality remains so consistently high. Even the weakest episodes have at least one striking element: the season three instalment 'Teso dos Bichos', with its infamous batch of killer kitty cats, is widely regarded as a nadir, but still features one of Mulder's funniest moments ("Ladies first," he says to Scully before they enter a muddy underground tunnel). And what often goes unmentioned in discussions of the series is that, in the era before showrunners like David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) and *X-Files* alumnus Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*) were king, this was one of the few long-running TV productions where the original creator/executive producer guided it the whole way through. Michael Mann left *Miami Vice*. David Lynch departed *Twin Peaks*. Joss Whedon took a back seat on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But Carter (minus a brief period during contract negotiations for season nine) stayed on. Every decision made in the series, for good and ill, bears his imprint.

That's not to say his was a purely monomaniacal vision. Carter provided the sturdy framework within which a number of creatives honed their distinctive talents, and the numerous auteurist interventions are among the greatest pleasures of *The X-Files*. The regular writers were a diverse bunch: Gilligan tended toward idiosyncratic character studies – one of his best is season five's 'Bad Blood', in which Mulder and Scully argue *Rashomon*-style about an abortive case involving a pizza-delivering vampire. John Shiban ambitiously tackled a number of racially charged subjects, as in the provocative season eight instalment 'Badlaa', about a diminutive Indian beggar who kills materialistic Westerners by literally crawling up inside them. Glen Morgan and James Wong – who were there at the series' inception and have returned for the new miniseries – contributed many memorable hours, the most scandalous being season four's 'Home', in which our intrepid agents stumble across an incestuous brood known as the Peacocks. In the episode's queasily drawn-out centrepiece, the deformed clan brutally murder the local sheriff and his wife to the tune of Johnny Mathis's 'Wonderful! Wonderful!' (Mathis actually refused permission to use his version of the song, so the producers had to hire an expert sound-alike.)

The directors were similarly singular: the late Kim Manners was the linchpin, directing 52 of the series' 202 episodes, and proving himself equally adept at the horrific (season four's memorably gory devil-worshipping plastic surgeon tale 'Sanguinarium') and the comic (season five's 'Unusual Suspects' – a humorous showcase for Mulder and Scully's trio of conspiracy-obsessed informants known as The Lone Gunmen, which paved the way to a short-lived and underrated spin-off series). The great talents of another regular director, Rob Bowman, were evident from his first episode, season one's 'Gender Bender': this ludicrous tale about a sex-crazed Amish alien was elevated by eye-popping deep-focus imagery and a try-anything sense of shadowy atmosphere.



There's something about the series' impossible narrative, with its allegiance-switching allies and malevolent adversaries like the Cigarette Smoking Man, that consistently compels

Bowman would go on to direct many of the best instalments, both standalone tales and those tapping into the series' 'alien colonisation' mythology, as well as the enterprisingly grandiose 1998 movie, *The X-Files* (aka *X-Files: Fight the Future*), which bridged seasons five and six.

Essential contributions were made, too, by directors of photography such as John S. Bartley (instrumental in defining the colourfully *noirish*, often rain-slicked palette of the first three seasons) and Bill Roe, DP for the Los Angeles seasons. His third assignment, season six's 'Triangle', was a giddy time-travel adventure shot mostly in sinuous single takes. And no *X-Files* article can be written without mentioning the work of composer Mark Snow, whose moody, synth-heavy score accompanied every episode and both movies, and helped to land him a job scoring the last four features of French New Wave great Alain Resnais, a devoted *X-Files* fan.

INTO THE LABYRINTH

This is all to say that there are numerous ways to appreciate *The X-Files* beyond the usual pleasures and pains of its plot. Narrative is, however, the level on which it seems to engage and ultimately lose most people. The alien colonisation narrative was mostly a by-product of Anderson's unexpected pregnancy, which straddled the first and second seasons. Since she'd have to miss one full episode and be sidelined for several more, Carter and the writers came up with a powerful storyline that saw the *X-Files* unit shut down and Scully abducted – developments that are constantly referred to and occasionally repeated through the rest of the series.

The longer *The X-Files* goes on, the more complicated the mythology becomes, introducing a number of microcosmic struggles (such as Mulder's seasons-spanning search for his missing sister Samantha, or Scully's bout of cancer in years four and five – an incredible showcase for Anderson) among such macrocosmic convolutions as the facially mutilated rebel aliens who burn their enemies with metallic igniters. I was fortunate enough to host a panel featuring Duchovny and Anderson at New York City's Paley Center for Media in 2013: one of the funniest moments came when I tried unsuccessfully to explain a season nine story-point about magnetite, the metal that effectively destroys the alien colonisers. "Are you serious?" Anderson asked before breaking into hysterics. "What the *fuck* is magnetite?" she shouted, to the audible delight of the gathered Philes.

Try breaking down the mythology to its finer points and people – even those who were involved in creating it – will start looking around for a straitjacket. No use denying: it's pretty ridiculous, and I can certainly understand when a non-fan like David Thomson, writing about Anderson in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, dismissed the series as "high-class tosh". Carter often played coy while the show was airing, insisting he had a plan and was not making things up as he went along, when he clearly was. (Though I *do* believe he had certain story-points in mind early on – such as the final date of the alien invasion, 22 December 2012, coinciding with the end of the Mayan calendar.)

And yet there's something about this impossible narrative – with its dark alleyways and dead-ends; with allegiance-switching allies like the fatherly Deep Throat (Jerry Hardin) and the gruff Walter Skinner (Mitch

Pileggi); with memorably malevolent adversaries like the Russian double-agent Alex Krycek (Nicholas Lea) and the unkillable puppetmaster known as the Cigarette Smoking Man (William B. Davis) – that consistently compels. The series' best writer was Darin Morgan, who penned four astonishing satirical, elaborately layered episodes that give him a claim to being the small-screen Charlie Kaufman. He pretty much pinpointed the alluring essence of *The X-Files*'s tangled plot in a sequence from his great season two circus-freaks murder mystery 'Humbug'. Scully visits a museum of curiosities looking for clues to the killer's identity. The establishment's disfigured owner (Alex Diakun) directs her, for a gently coaxed donation of five dollars, into a dark room where he has stored showman P.T. Barnum's exhibit 'A Great Unknown'. Scully walks toward the metal box in the centre of the room and opens it. It's empty. Then a doorway opens to the outside world. A Great Unknown.

Look too hard for concrete answers and you can miss the transcendental beauties surrounding you. Even as *The X-Files*' narrative devours itself, the mystery that is Mulder and Scully – the believer and the sceptic, two emblematically opposite characters forever entangled – provides deep and ongoing emotional sustenance. This is a romance that evolves from affectionately platonic in the early seasons (a delicate shoulder-touch here, an off-guard compliment there) to fervently amorous by the end, when they have a child together (by mysterious means, of course) and write emails headlined with baldly impassioned salutations like "Dearest Dana..."

This isn't quite a case of *Moonlighting*-style fan service: Duchovny and Anderson play Mulder and Scully's interactions as a courtship from the start. The mere fact of their being in each other's company (and sometimes violently separated by circumstances beyond their control) pushes their rapport continually forward by tantalising increments. When the long-delayed kiss finally comes, it feels freighted with history, possessing a sublimely instinctual intimacy. Yet their passion is not only for each other, but for the work that drives and obsesses them.

Carter has said, aptly, that the series is about the search for God. Each X-File case is like a hard-won nugget of wisdom on a spiritual journey that brings Mulder and Scully (who is candidly Catholic, and often photographed to suggest the Virgin Mary in earthly garb) ever closer to enlightenment – to the truth that is, as the series' memorable tagline promises, "out there". But of course, as life goes on, the decisive revelation they desire is ever more elusive.

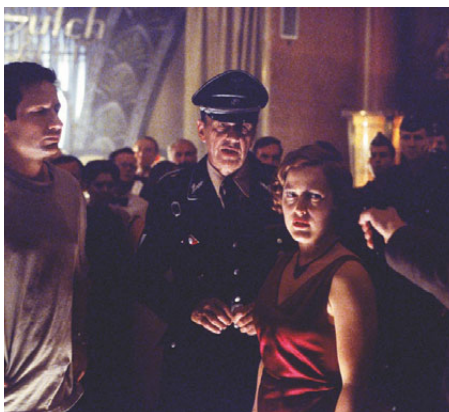
To that end, the first episode of the new miniseries, written and directed by Carter, attempts to refocus the mythology and the Mulder-Scully relationship in a number of interesting ways. No longer employed by the FBI, and their romance having soured, the duo are nevertheless drawn back into action by a conservative conspiracy theorist, Tad O'Malley (Joel McHale), who insists he has the real facts behind the alien conspiracy. Mulder now comes to see himself as, in effect, a character who has been trapped in a "fiction masquerading as fact". Aliens are not the real aggressors: men are – men with delusions of power who will use extraterrestrial technology to take over the world, and who have gone to great lengths to concoct elaborate cover narratives to protect their secrets. Stories within stories within stories... and ever on.

This is in some ways Carter's own attempt to streamline a mythology that has got out of hand. But it is still a mostly effective gambit, because it plays expertly on a distrust of government that was going out of fashion in the George W. Bush years (the original series came to an end in May 2002, at the height of Dubya's influence) but has come back with a vengeance in the era of mass surveillance and Edward Snowden. O'Malley and Mulder's lengthy rapid-fire explication of the new conspiracy is knowingly ludicrous (and Scully's nonplussed reaction to it all is priceless), yet it still tantalises because you can sense how it stokes the old flames in our old flames. (And speaking of fiery things, it should come as no surprise that the Cigarette Smoking Man is once again behind it all.)

There's a scene early on in the new miniseries that acts as a beautiful reminder of Mulder and Scully's first meeting in that basement office, and perfectly encapsulates why *The X-Files* continues to transfix. This time the duo meets on the side of a road in Washington DC, no longer young, open and expectant, but clearly ravaged by time and emotional distance. Some cheeky, up-to-the-moment banter ensues. "Uber?" asks Scully as a dishevelled Mulder steps from his car. "Hitchhiked," quips Mulder with his typically blank, unreadable tone. She stares at him quizzically. "Relax, Scully, I'm kidding." But of course. The old rhythms are slightly rusty, but still there. A few more awkward exchanges follow. Then: "I'm always happy to see you," says Scully. "I'm always happy to find a reason," says Mulder. Quite simply, it's a love story. ☺

i **The X-Files miniseries airs on Fox in the US from 24 January and on Channel 5 in the UK early in the year**

TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED
Given the series' punishing schedule, it's astonishing that such a high standard was maintained, in episodes such as (below, from left) the humorous 'Unusual Suspects', the giddy time-travel adventure 'Triangle', and the provocative 'Badlaa'



JEAN-LUC GODARD: A MAN OF THE 60s

Whether or not Godard, as some claim, disappeared into self-imposed obscurantist exile at the end of the 1960s, for the best part of that decade he was in glorious alignment with the spirit of the time, his films earning popular acclaim by perfectly capturing its rebellious atmosphere

By Kent Jones

Where do you start with Jean-Luc Godard, and where do you end? In fact, to do either is to run the risk of violating the endlessly changing terms of engagement that he himself has established for us, in countless interviews throughout the years. “Interviews have provided him with a parallel sound track on the public record,” writes Richard Brody in his 2008 critical biography *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*, “and a vehicle for the intellectual profusion that spilled beyond the confines of his films.” They have also provided the sympathetic reader with a framework in which to place Godard, his work and the cinema in general, as well as a tacit invitation to infer an equation between his practice and the phantom heart of the artform itself.

Godard, to quote the critic Manny Farber, is “supremely a man of the sixties”. Like Dylan, Warhol and John Lennon, albeit within a briefer span of time at a lesser pitch of fame, his celebrity was tied to his ethical integrity and his artistic practice, and he has always defined his own ground and spoken and acted only by his own lights, paying no heed to mindless charges of charlatan-

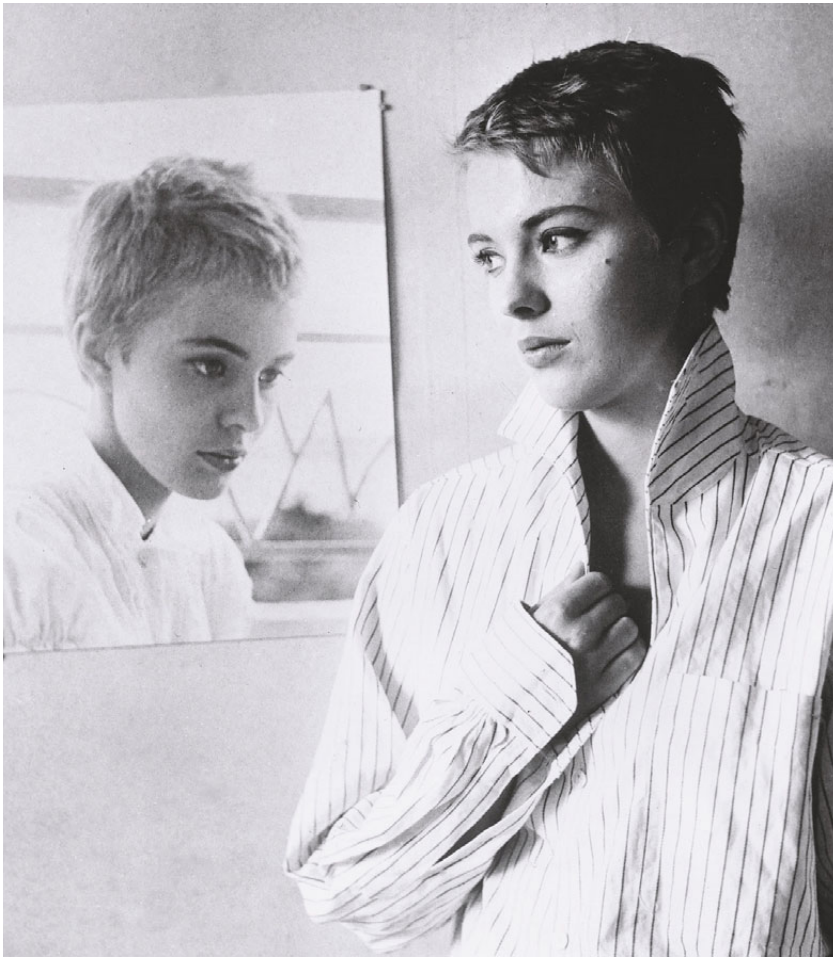
ism or incomprehensibility, and for that reason his interviews are events in and of themselves and of a piece with his *oeuvre*. But unlike the aforementioned artists, all of whom, like him, were thrust into the role of herald/prophet/oracle/hero by their followers, Godard employs an extremely unusual public rhetoric, with a strong scent of Dostoevsky’s Grushenka, *Women in Love*’s Hermione, and other quicksilver women from late 19th- and early 20th-century literature. Meanwhile, his terminally distanced presence, so different from Warhol’s, has always betrayed a powerful undercurrent of doubt and ancient pain. In his appearances on talk shows and at debates and press conferences, his playful streak aside, Godard evokes the more quixotic male figures of the *noir* canon: with his mix of carefully cultivated, cigar-puffing stoicism and unashamed vulnerability, he lies somewhere between Robert Ryan, Elisha Cook, Jr and Paul Kelly’s touchingly eccentric, unhinged husband in *Crossfire* (1947). When Godard holds forth, no compliment goes unqualified, damnations by way of the faintest praise are tendered by the dozen, and pronounce-

WORK IN PROGRESS

The films of Jean-Luc Godard (right, on the set of *Le Mépris* in 1963) have repeatedly redefined the terms of his art, breaking every contract he enters into with his audience and always subtly undermining and upending what appear to be his own aesthetic rules

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN LOUIS SWINERS/GETTY IMAGES





Manny Farber gets at the effect of the push-me, pull-me relationship between filmmaker and audience: 'No other filmmaker has so consistently made me feel like a stupid ass'



MIRROR OF THE TIMES
Jean Seberg in Godard's *Breathless* (1960, above) and (left) Sami Frey, Anna Karina and Claude Brasseur in *Bande à part* (1964)

ments are handed down like last judgements. In a sense, Godard's emotional positioning in relation to almost everyone and everything can be boiled down to what the anthropologist Gregory Bateson defined as the double-bind relationship between parent and child, the stalemate between holding on and letting go that can be summed up with the paradoxical admonition to "stay away closer".

Just as Godard often manages to remain the centre of attention in public forums by redefining the terms of the discussion from moment to moment, thus keeping everyone else in the room off balance, so his films constantly redefine their modes of address and their relationships to their viewers. In this sense, he is unlike almost every other major artist of his own time or, for that matter, any other time. He breaks every contract he enters into with his audience, and always subtly undermines and upends what appear to be his own aesthetic rules, the kinds of rules that everyone from Hawks to Rivette to Straub and Huillet to Costa silently establish from the outset of every film and observe.

One could cite movies like Suzuki's *Pistol Opera* (2002), the collected works of João César Monteiro or some of William Burroughs's later novels by way of comparison, but Godard is never compulsively, thus monotonously and thus boringly, 'inventive'. Rather, he always stays rigorously fixed within the limits of his choices and develops a rich aesthetic vocabulary for each movie. But the moment almost always arrives when he starts to pull the veil back over himself and his characters and their story, by means of violent changes in tone or tiny adjustments of aesthetic address that upend any claim to uniformity. Sometimes this happens during the movie, but more often it happens much later, as the film is recalled in the mind. Where *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *L'écclisse* (1962), *Not Reconciled* (1965), *Persona* (1966) and many of the other 'difficult' movies made during Godard's heyday play out in memory as uniform experiences, his own films finally do not. Nor do they offer themselves as vessels that contain vast areas of contradictory and discordant experience, as in a Mahler symphony, a Webern chamber piece or a poem by Williams.

To my eyes, the uniformity that has been ascribed to Godard's work has always been a little too hastily and conveniently filed under B for Brechtian, M for Modernist (or is that Marxist?) or R for Radical, categories grounded in the particulars of the now bygone moment when he took the cinema by storm. *Pierrot le fou* (1965) is one of the high points of the 60s, and I am with Andrew Sarris when he lays out its many contradictions, its "violent clash between blood-red melodrama and sky-blue contemplation", but I part company with him on the allegedly "resultant unity of features and feelings". I love *Vivre sa vie* (1962), but I can't quite square it with the "perfect film" made by "the most important director to have emerged in the last ten years" – the "lapse" of the 'Oval Portrait' interlude aside – described by Susan Sontag.

Godard veers so consistently toward and away from prolonged engagement with his characters, his themes and his audiences that it seems to me that this very action of withdrawal/engagement/withdrawal/re-engagement is his true artistic signature, as personal as Hawks's cultivation of camaraderie and interconnectedness. The signal action of disrupting and restarting the

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATIONAL ARCHIVE (2)



movie overrides almost every other consideration. One of the great paradoxes of Godard's career is that his work has been imbued with a phantom unity by his defenders – indeed, by those who take up his defence as something akin to a moral cause – as a reaction to the mindless calls for such unity by thoughtless cultural watchdogs. Thus leaving his films twice misdescribed.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

In one of the best and least reverent pieces ever written on Godard, Farber gets at the net effect of this push-pull relationship between filmmaker and audience with his unforgettable concluding sentence: "In short, no other filmmaker has so consistently made me feel like a stupid ass." It's not uncommon to see people leaving a Godard film in a daze of emotions – enriched, intellectually inadequate, privately flummoxed. This is as true of *Goodbye to Language* (2014) as it was of *Breathless* (1960), albeit within a vastly different set of historical circumstances.

Quentin Tarantino's ridiculous claim that Godard "disappeared up his own ass" after the 60s aside (he said something very similar about David Lynch), I don't believe that Godard has really changed very much as an artist over the years, his engagement with new tools (shooting and editing on video and then HD, Pro Tools, 3D, etc) notwithstanding. Rather, it's the world around him that has changed. The level of respect for artists in Europe and the States has decreased along with the shared belief, no matter how tenuous, in a common humanity, both running high when Godard was making his first movies. He

was never a hitmaker, but that the sense of inadequacy in the face of artistic complexity that Farber owned up to was swallowed a little more willingly in those days (so willingly that Brian De Palma parodied this phenomenon, brilliantly, in the 'Be Black Baby' sequence of his 1970 *Hi, Mom!*). For that reason, and because he made movies in the recognisable present that veered directly into the toughest and most sensitive issues of his time – Gaullism, the Algerian war, consumerism, the subjugation of women, Vietnam – and because his sense of filmic beauty was, and is, almost unparalleled, Godard, the most stubbornly and defiantly *alone* of all filmmakers, was thrust for a brief but crucial interval into a give and take with his audience. It was fleeting, but the memory of it is still forcefully present. For a few years, Godard, along with Dylan and Mailer and The Beatles and Stones, rode the wave of his time, catching the culturally inchoate and unarticulated, the stuff that was 'in the air', and giving it artistic form before it became clarified, absorbed and played out on the nightly news and in the opinion pages, a perfect mirror to a rapidly changing moment. In the process, he inspired young left-wing filmmakers across the globe, from Garrel to Bertolucci to Oshima. But beautiful as the memory of that moment is, the glamour of those years between *Breathless* and *Weekend* (1967) is finally incidental to Godard's power.

The film theorist David Bordwell has argued that Godard is essentially a narrative artist as opposed to a poet, which I have contended in the past. But I suppose that we're both wrong in the sense that

BREEDING CONTEMPT
Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli in *Le Mépris*, now commonly regarded as one of Godard's greatest films but one that was once routinely dismissed as his big international sell-out

Poet, visual artist, storyteller, philosopher, essayist, ethnographer, sociologist, elegist – in any given film Godard is all of the above

Godard has never been *essentially* anything. Poet, visual artist, storyteller, philosopher, essayist, ethnographer, sociologist, elegist – in any given film he is all of the above, though never all at the same time. Every individual Godard film is a record of shifting registers, from the fragile to the rock-solid, from the elegiac to the shrilly satirical, from the intimate to the removed, from the personal to the impersonal, and each rupture in tone and rhythm leaves its trace. In the matter of narrative, the films do not really develop, strictly speaking, as much as they accumulate, and that includes *Vivre sa vie* and *Pierrot le fou*, in which the level of investment in narrative incident and character varies from scene to scene. The same goes for all of Godard's films, including *Every Man for Himself* (1980) and *Nouvelle vague* (1990) – their greatness does not lie in their narrative drive. The exception is *Le Mépris* (1963), which stands utterly and nakedly alone in Godard's body of work, in the sense that the tonal change-ups are subsumed in the emotional undertow. I find Brody's close autobiographical interpretations of the individual films a little too narrowly aligned at times with the state of Godard's romantic relationships, but in the case of *Le Mépris* his approach seems not only apt but unavoidable. That film is so harrowingly acute from beginning to end that it all but betrays the inspiration of a real deteriorating marriage. I suppose it's worth noting here that *Le Mépris*, now commonly considered one of Godard's greatest films, was once routinely dismissed as his big international sell-out.

Another paradox: while Godard has cast himself as the enemy of Moses and the partisan of the image, his

films contain and are surrounded by torrents of words, words and more words. I know of no other filmmaker so evidently beholden to words – spoken, screamed, sung, recited, quoted, dictated, written on blackboards and notebook pages, employed as design elements. Sometimes the words are meant to be heard for meaning and sometimes for verbal music, sometimes their function is dramatic and sometimes it's philosophical. The many aforementioned interviews, the volumes of criticism and published screenplays and lectures and debates, and the filmed records of Godard speaking only add to the vast, unconquerable mountain of words, words whose relationship to the images is sometimes clear and sometimes not. "I think that I shall never... hear so many big words that tell me nothing, or be an audience to film-writing which gets to the heart of an obvious idea and hangs in there, or be so edified by the sound and sight of decent, noble words spoken with utter piety," wrote Farber in the final paragraph of his piece, and this passage gets at one of the most unusual aspects of Godard's practice.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

This is an artist who breathes images. I can close my eyes and see the preparations for the recreations of the paintings in *Passion* (1982), Anna Karina sitting at the table writing in her diary in *Vivre sa vie*, the preternaturally quiet snowscape in the deep woods in *JLG/JLG: Self-Portrait in December* (1994), the steely impassivity of Isabelle Huppert in close-up as she plays her part in the daisy chain in *Every Man for Himself* (1980), the farmyard piano recital in *Weekend*, the astonishing dissolves between visual forms and heart-stopping cuts to black throughout *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988)... it's as if I'd seen them all just a few seconds ago. And I can hear the sounds – the raven's cries that punctuate the dialogue in *Nouvelle vague*, the rhythmic sounds of cups and glasses that punctuate the extreme silence and presage Godard's anguished recital over the cosmic cup of coffee in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). But I rarely remember the words, beyond an exclamation here or a taut metaphor there. Godard maintains an odd distance from language, a mixture of awe and wariness bordering on fear. He tends to arrange words in solid blocks, rarely allowing them to breathe and find their own measure, often letting them pile up and topple over or run headlong into one another (the later films in particular are filled with spectacular collisions of spoken language as pure sound). All the quoting from Heidegger and Marx and Brecht and Jakobson and Blanchot and Chandler and Plato and so on tends to lose its meaning and become a purely percussive element on the one hand, and create an impression of unfathomable and ultimately unabsorbable cultural terrain on the other. But here, I think, right where the films are at their most wayward, is the way to understanding Godard's magic.

So much has been said about Godard and attributed to his films in the nearly 60 years since *Breathless*. We have a number of myths – Godard the innovator, always one step ahead of the rest of us; Godard the Omniscient and Supreme Truth Teller, treated as a last stop by cinephiles who shortened his name to God and received his films as emanations of a greatness beyond that of anyone or anything else in cinema; Godard the Socio-Political-Aesthetic-Marxist Historiographer, with the clearest and only

DRIVING FORCE
In narrative terms, Godard's films, such as *Pierrot le fou* (1965, below) and *Vivre sa vie* (1962, bottom), do not so much develop as accumulate



reliable vision of our past, present and future. As Philippe Garrel, perhaps the one filmmaker who has really built from Godard's aesthetic, has put it, there is no such thing as innovation in the arts, and to imagine otherwise is to misunderstand art. The jump cuts in *Breathless*, for instance, aren't an innovation but a harbinger of freedom in cinema; and within the local reality of the film itself, they are rhythmic inflections that build an awareness of existential time.

As a diagnostician of the way we live now, he can get lost in the maze of so many mixed and matched cinematic/art-historical/literary evocations and historical and mythological allusions. But he can also be uniquely penetrating. There are startling moments that have the clarifying effect, to quote Peter Handke on Godard, of a knife slicing through the curtain of reality. For instance, the scene in *Germany Year 90 Nine-zero* (1991) in which Eddie Constantine's aged Lemmy Caution lies down on his hotel bed, just as he had in *Alphaville* (1965) a quarter of a century earlier, and has his feet propped up by the maid with a copy of *Das Kapital*. Don't you think you work too hard, he asks. Her unforgettable answer – "*Arbeit macht frei*" – perfectly caps a brisk enactment of historical amnesia in the early days of the New World Order. It's an emblematic moment in the sense that it arrives by surprise, in an illuminating flash, just as all great moments in Godard do. There are, to be sure, lengthy passages in Godard's work in which the duration itself is wondrous, like Belmondo and Seberg's passing of the hours in the hotel room in *Breathless* or Anne Wiazemsky's train ride with Francis Jeanson in *La Chinoise* (1967) – or, for that

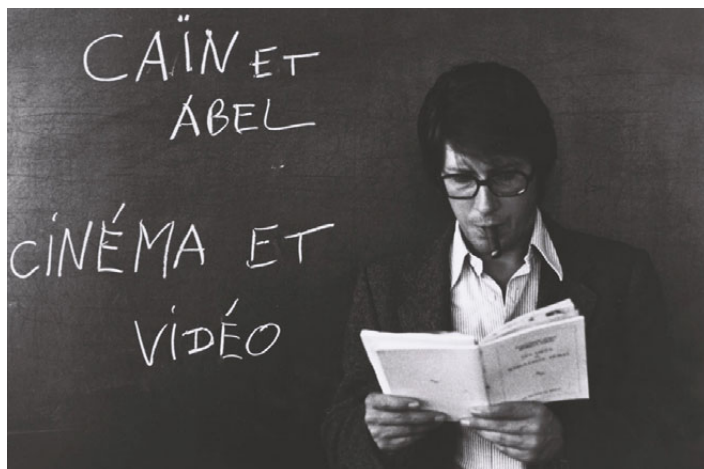
matter, any given scene of *Le Mépris*. But the greatest moments arrive in the manner described by Handke, with a sudden jump, reversal, plunge or reconfiguration of space and time that jolts us into seeing the world, and the cinema, as if for the first time, again and again.

Godard has often been compared to Joyce, but he is, in the end, much closer in temperament and practice to Ezra Pound. (In making that comparison, I am thinking of neither Pound's embrace of Italian fascism nor his noxious anti-Semitism.) Like Pound, Godard looks further back into history than most of his contemporaries, motivated by a grandiose but touching desire to steer civilisation back on course. Like Pound, he has created a body of work – finally so different from that of any other filmmaker precisely *because* the films are so unresolved and so contingent on the changing humours of their creator – that amounts to a life poem. Both Pound and Godard allow Western culture to overflow its banks and flood their work. And one might even say they court the world they despise and summon it into their presence in order to obliterate it with the sudden flash, the perceptual shock of fresh, unencumbered poetic and cinematic vision.

"Make it new," advised Pound, who took a French translation of an ancient Chinese proverb, simplified it, and inadvertently created a modernist slogan. It would seem that Jean-Luc Godard received the message. And, in the end, he became the one artist in all of cinema whose films are always beginning. Again... ⑥

i A retrospective of Jean-Luc Godard's films screens at BFI Southbank, London, until the end of March. *Le Mépris* is out now in select cinemas nationwide

A MAN OF HIS WORD
There is possibly no other filmmaker who is so beholden to words in his films, as seen below in (clockwise from top left) *Every Man for Himself* (1980), *Made in the U.S.A.* (1966), *Histoire(s) du cinéma...* (1988) and *Film socialisme* (2010)



FESTIVAL: VIENNALE

VIENNESE WHIRL

With posthumous works by cinema greats and exciting films from new names, the Viennale remains an essential festival

By Kieron Corless

There was a warm glow of familiarity about this year's Viennale, with artistic director Hans Hurch presenting films by Jean-Marie Straub, Jean-Claude Rousseau and Klaus Wyborny – a trio who, with a few others, have been talismanic presences throughout his 17 years as festival director. Other enticements included a gathering of Austrian pulp films, special programmes devoted to Mark Rappaport, Anne Charlotte Robertson (see page 54) and Greece (focusing on the last, crisis-ridden decade), tributes to Manoel de Oliveira, the Argentinian uber-independent Raúl Perrone, and Tippi Hedren (who came and conquered, by all accounts, with an incomparably graceful wit and charm),

a superbly mounted Ida Lupino retrospective, plus the usual canny selection of new releases. Over at the Film Museum, director Alexander Horwath opted to skew our human-centric habits of thinking about cinema via a bewitching programme devoted to the subject of animals on screen, with rarities and surprises aplenty among the more obvious choices. I never thought I'd get to see Road Runner on the big screen, in the original format, but there it was, tucked away in an animated shorts programme.

Like any film festival, the Viennale is a collective endeavour, and invites several guest programmers each edition, but in the end one person determines the overall tone and tenor of the programme; in that sense it might be deemed an auteurist festival, one of the few remaining – none of your corporate-style, committee-led programming in this neck of the Vienna woods, *vielen Dank*. “We consider the preoccupation with film history, theory and politics as an essential part of our work,” declared Hurch's catalogue statement. “Not in a superficial, outward way, but

anchored within the specifics of the festival. As heart of the matter.” There was some concern last year that Hurch was going to leave the festival after this edition, but a three-year contract has been signed, meaning the Viennale is in safe hands till 2018 at least. As one's head starts to droop at the prospect of advancing winter, and despite stiff competition at this time of the year from a very fine DocLisboa, an emergent Seville and the ever-reliable CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, plus one or two others, the Viennale still seems the prime spot for galvanisation.

Three films in this year's programme towered above the rest. *Wake (Subic)* – John Gianvito's six-and-a-half-hour follow-up to *Vapor Trail (Clark)*, in effect the second half of a diptych about

The Viennale is an auteurist festival – none of your committee-led programming in this neck of the Vienna woods, vielen Dank



Renaissance man? Suzuki Yohei's *Maru*, a film with imagination to burn

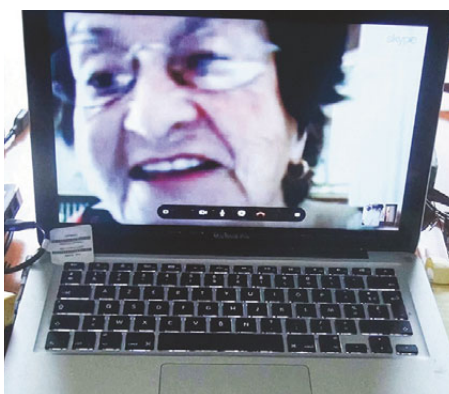
American military colonialism in the Philippines – will be the subject of dedicated coverage in these pages in a forthcoming issue. The other two were Manoel de Oliveira's posthumous autobiographical essay film *Visit, or Memories and Confessions*, and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* – an obvious pairing for all kinds of reasons apart from the directors' recent deaths. Both films are permeated by an awareness of mortality that cinema images can ultimately do nothing to ward off, only steadfastly register; while the restriction of the visual field – for the most part – to one domestic location and its surroundings crucially sharpens our perceptions of the temporal layers unfolded in each.

Visit, or Memories and Confessions was Oliveira's seventh feature, made in 1982 when he was 73 years old, but owing to its personal nature he instructed that it only be shown after his death. It's filmed in the exquisite curvilinear Porto home and verdant garden that Oliveira had lived in for four decades with his wife and children, but which he was now forced to sell to pay off debts accrued when the family hat business went bust. We're led through the gate into the garden and then the house by a couple, a man and a woman, whom we never see. Their spectral presence and airy, metaphor-laden speculations on the house (they compare it to a ship, the trees outside to its guardians), its objects and inhabitants create a lilting, dreamlike atmosphere that calls to mind Alain Resnais. (The script is by the eminent Portuguese novelist Agustina Bessa-Luís, one of whose novels Oliveira had already by this stage in his career adapted for cinema, in *Francisca*, 1981.)

The camera moseys through the house until eventually it alights on Oliveira himself, seemingly a ghost typing a script at his desk, mock-startled by the intrusion. He begins to address the camera directly with a profusion of memories and reflections: on family and friends past and present, on cinema, on his ideas concerning religion, love, death, women, purity, the sanctity of marriage, on the desire he's occasionally felt for his actresses, on being imprisoned for several days by the Portuguese dictator Salazar's police; he even shows us excerpts from his home movies. The tone manages to be at the same time playfully ironic and elegiac.

The film is a kind of summation and confessional, prompted not only by the traumatic loss of his house but by what Oliveira must have felt was his encroaching death – the greatest irony, of course, being that he would live to 106 and make another 25 features. On the surface it seems simple and effortless, but the orchestration of different voices, the binding of documentary and fictional elements into something that transcends both, the way it gradually accrues emotional depth and poetic density, are all stunningly achieved. A scene late in the film introduces his wife in the garden, who also addresses us directly about the difficulties of being married to an artist, the "life of abnegation" it entails. It undercuts and reconfigures what we've already heard and, since Oliveira himself is presumably behind the camera, suggests depths and mysteries to their union we can only guess at.

Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* was filmed



Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*

in the spacious Brussels flat where her mother, a wartime refugee and Auschwitz survivor, had lived most of her life, often confined to it because of an anxiety disorder. Akerman recorded her as her health was starting to decline rapidly (she died in 2014). On the surface, not a lot happens; we listen in to their conversations as they eat together, or overhear snatched fragments as they go about their daily routine, Akerman's digital camera observing her mother's slow, difficult movements. Sometimes we just see empty rooms, shot through doorways, or look out of a window down to the empty garden where a sunbed sits forlornly. Interspersed with this material are shots of an Israeli desert landscape filmed from inside a car; and occasionally Akerman captures her mother's face on a computer screen as she Skypes her from some anonymous hotel room elsewhere in the world. We barely see Akerman herself, except from behind during the meal conversation or caught in reflection, camera in hand, on the computer screen, the better to bring her mother into focus.

At one point Akerman's mother asks why she is filming her: "I want to show that there is no distance in the world," Akerman answers. Early in her career Akerman made *News from Home* (1976), in which, to haunting effect, she read her mother's letters over images of New York, where she was then living. That film showed not only the physical distance between them but Akerman grappling with a sense of disconnection from her mother and the complex familial and cultural legacy she'd inherited. Many of her later films would measure the distances between people with uncanny precision. That comment by the now much older Akerman suggests a wish, but

one that, agonisingly, she knows can never be fulfilled – one reading of the film's ambiguous title tells its own story, as do those shots of rooms slowly, inexorably emptying of life. Incredible tenderness and love is expressed between the two women – at times it feels as if Akerman has regressed to childhood, with her repeated cooing of "mami-coeur" – but there remains a gulf in life experiences, and a blazing anger on the younger woman's part at the suffering inflicted on the elder. The same dynamic as the earlier film inheres, Akerman's international lifestyle contrasting with her mother's confinement (and shades of 1975's *Jeanne Dielman*, too, in those kitchen shots?). It's a hard film to watch, especially in the light of Akerman's recent suicide but, like the Oliveira, it is fearless, formally controlled and magnificent in its self-exposure.

Skilfully rendered domestic spaces, in this case tight and small, were again foregrounded in Suzuki Yohei's debut feature *Maru*, a low-budget Japanese independent with imagination to burn; but this time the notion of confinement was pushed further and charged with an overt political dimension. The film is set in a drab suburban middle-class home where the salaryman father has been made redundant but can't bring himself to tell his family, the son has never had a job, the grandmother has dementia, and the mother is being ground down by trying to deal with it all. One morning the son and his girlfriend are confronted by a strange orb hovering in the corner of his bedroom; the sight freezes them in position, unable to speak, though still clearly conscious. Various characters enter the room, including numerous police officers, one of whom accidentally, farcically ends up dead, setting in train a beautifully sustained mash-up of blackly comic satire, sci-fi mystery, police procedural and social realist critique. The film knows exactly how to make a virtue of its clearly limited means – especially in the work of the actors, who remain inert while suggesting minds racing and unravelling behind their masks. It keeps getting weirder, tension ramping up, until finally something has to give... Ultimately the spirits of Wilhelm Reich and the revolts of '68 are invoked as a counter to the ills and inertia of Japanese society. It's too early to say whether *Maru* is the first evidence of a renaissance for Japan's moribund cinema; we can but hope. For all the Viennale's veneration of the greats like Straub, Farocki etc, it also recognises a genuine new talent when it sees one. 🍷



Oliveira's *Visit, or Memories and Confessions*



John Gianvito's *Wake (Subic)*

BIPOLAR EXPLORER

Since her death three years ago, the archives of super 8 diarist Anne Charlotte Robinson have revealed a filmmaker of raw genius

By **Andréa Picard**

"I have a problem. I keep falling in love."

— Anne Charlotte Robertson

The Viennale has long been a film festival eager to research, present and celebrate cinema history, with august retrospective programming integral to each year's edition. This year, an alliterative programme showcased the 3Rs, Rappaport, Rousseau and Robertson, forging correspondences between past and present along three distinct bodies of work. The New Yorker Mark Rappaport specialises in inventive excavations of film history, most notably through monologues by bygone movie stars, while the febrile videos of the French first-person filmmaker Jean-Claude Rousseau often function like an ongoing confessional travel journal. Next to these, the late Anne Charlotte Robertson's super 8 diaries seethe with raw intensity.

Before she died of cancer in 2012, the artist donated an abundance of films, audio recordings and writings to Harvard, now archived as the Anne Charlotte Robertson Collection. Thanks to the enthusiastic efforts of the Harvard Film Archive, especially the conservator Liz Coffey, it has become clear that this Boston-based underground artist produced a major body of work, with often remarked affinities to that of Ed Pincus, Jonas Mekas and Carolee Schneemann but also, arguably, to some of Martha Rosler's iconic videos and the early films of Chantal Akerman. Working under the tutelage of the super 8 master Saul Levine, Robertson was prolific and compulsive, forging an artistic path that was unshakeably tethered to her mental illness. The manic rhythms created through time-lapse photography, frame-by-frame shooting and pathological repetitions – most notably in her magnum opus *Five Year Diary* (which, in reel 26, a professor likens to *Moby-Dick*) – echo the crescendos of mental disorder, but also reveal a sharp wit, a trenchant sense of humour and an anarchic pull toward play and myth-making.

Five Year Diary was far from a five-year endeavour. From 1981 to 1997, Robertson shot nearly 38 hours of film, chronicling her life, her emotional tumults, her physical transformations, her moods and her surroundings, especially her apartment, her cat and her garden. Each reel begins with the animation of a bright red-orange paper book announcing her *Five Year Diary* in bold, black capitals. Recurring motifs include cookie dough and the television screen – the batter being stirred, spooned on to baking sheets, baked cookies always multiplying, as the television glows a twilight blue in the background, a pulsing, blurry stream of images representing life outside the confines of her domestic setting: the Boston Marathon, the events of 9/11. The filmmaker's daily life is recorded sped up and ad infinitum – the cycles of life distilled to certain obsessions, such as unattainable and



Me, myself & I: Anne Charlotte Robertson in *Apologies*

ever elusive real love, her self-destructive overconsumption of food, coffee, cigarettes and booze, her illness and the frustrations of treatment, and the devastation of death. At one point, her three-year-old niece dies from heart problems and Robertson's intense in-the-camera confessional up-ends all judgement: "Emily died and I'm having a nervous breakdown." Her filmmaking has a central importance, not only recording her life but fuelling it with the allure of creation and possibility, and quelling the panic of the quotidian – the nagging "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is", to quote Wallace Stevens.


Despite the darkness that haunts Robertson's films – the worrisome bags under her eyes grow puffier as time passes, apparently the physical manifestation of inner turmoil – renewal and regeneration are at the core of the *Diary*. Although she includes clichés (budding flowers, fireworks, blurry traffic lights and Niagara Falls), a distinctive force animates the cacophony of a life lived in the throes of extremity inflicted by her bipolar disorder. The film sometimes has synched sound, at other times is silent or overlaid with multiple soundtracks – mostly incessant monologues, which were also delivered in person during live screenings. Her super 8 camera is the convener of her psyche, directing the flow and upwelling of associations, never failing to notice beauty in

Robertson was prolific and compulsive, forging an artistic path that was unshakeably tethered to her mental illness

the world and always providing an occasion for catharsis through humour – 'Rock the Casbah' heard blaring during a manic episode, the irony of her canary yellow leotard clinging to her body as she discusses her eating habits, the big, bold, absurd sign announcing her fluctuating weight in pounds, as if on a gameshow.

In *Apologies* (1986/90), one of her most staggering films, she offers the apology to end all apologies. This dirge includes saying sorry to all the homeless children in the world for spending her money on cigarettes, and to the audience for our having to watch the film: "*C'est la vie, les apologies!*" She's not sorry, though, for wearing moon boots while in the nude.

These are all beautiful, complex moments of self-absolution through hilarity. *Magazine Mouth* (1983) is a brilliant, riotous collage film in which flying pizza slices and the like are swallowed whole by Robertson's cut-out mouth bobbing in an ether dominated by floating food.

Despite her constant struggle for inner calm, Robertson consistently made work that transcended and transformed the immediacy of her fight, leaving a rich, unnerving and deeply moving *oeuvre* that has just begun to reveal itself as a major contribution to the American avant-garde – one that challenges the politics of feminism and mental illness in the most deceptive, slippery of ways. With grand, anarchic gestures, her performances revealed how she fell victim to debilitating societal demands – but also how melodrama, resilience and self-deprecation resuscitated a stunning sense of self. 

i *Five Year Diary* is showing at Raven Row gallery until February 16. For more information see www.ravenrow.org

MATTERS ARISING

While other festivals turn their backs on small, non-commercial movies, Tokyo's FILMeX is still fighting the good fight

By Tony Rayns

Cinephiles in Tokyo are lucky. They can scour the dispiriting line-up of the Tokyo International Film Festival for the odd gem, reflecting that it got there more likely by accident than by design, and then, a few weeks later, go to the Tokyo FILMeX festival for a smart selection of films that really matter. TIFF, like more and more festivals in the mould of Toronto's, spends most of its energies promoting movies that are about to be released commercially and cheerfully turns its back on most of the 'small' movies that need and deserve support. By contrast, FILMeX has been fighting the good fight for creative and original cinema for 16 years. It's far too politely Japanese to say so, but it implicitly stands against TIFF's embrace of commercial schlock and for the idea that films may have a value beyond their box-office potential.

FILMeX was founded when its programmer Ichiyama Shozo lost his job at TIFF running the Asian cinema strand and persuaded his employer Office Kitano – yes, Kitano Takeshi's production company – to let him launch a new, compact festival. This history explains why FILMeX shows mainly, but not exclusively, Asian films: last November's edition featured a 'rediscovery' of French actor-director Pierre Etaix alongside tributes to Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Tsai Ming-Liang. The meat of the festival, though, is its competition for newish Asian directors, and Ichiyama trawls wide to fill it, this time with titles from Sri Lanka, Nepal and Kazakhstan as well as Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines.

Of course, Ichiyama doesn't always come up with unmissables. The Thai film *Vanishing Point* by Jakrawal Nilthamrong, a Tiger-winner in Rotterdam, offers a jigsaw-puzzle plot without providing the key to its code; elegantly disturbing images alone are not enough. The Nepali film *The Black Hen* by Min Bahadur Bham (a prize-winner in Venice) tells the clearly autobiographical story of two boys from opposed



Shepherd's delight? *Tharlo*, by the Tibetan director Pema Tseden

castes caught up in the country's brutal Maoist insurgency in 2001; it's an awkward mix of modernist style – static, deep-focus compositions, contemplative pacing – and clunkily demonstrative acting by the non-pro cast.

More impressive choices included Chang Tsochi's knockout melodrama *Thanatos, Drunk* (Taiwan), which lays bare the death-wish in the lives of a naïve, working-class market trader and his smarter gay brother, and Zhanna Issabayeva's *Bopem* (Kazakhstan), in which a fatally ill boy whose name means "he who quenched his thirst" (he lives beside the dried-up Aral Sea) exacts murderous revenge on the men he blames for his mother's death. Issabayeva shoots in fauvist colours and stylises her visuals in the manner of Kim Kiduk, but her film is heartfelt and humane in ways that Kim's never are. The festival's runner-up Jury Prize was won by Chinese documentarist Zhao Liang for *Behemoth*, a film about the human and environmental devastation caused by the mines and steel-mills of Inner Mongolia. It's less observational and more 'constructed' and imagistic than Zhao's previous films have been, and that makes its undercurrents of anger and despair all the more potent.

It's too politely Japanese to say so, but FILMeX stands against the Tokyo International Film Festival's embrace of schlock

Shiota Akihiko made his mark more than two decades ago with a string of movies about ingenuous young people in sado-masochist relationships (sample titles: *Moonlight Whispers*, *Harmful Insect*, *Gips*), but then seemed lost to Japan's commercial mainstream. He was on the FILMeX jury this year, so the festival screened a new film in which he returns to his roots. *Lifeline* charts the non-romance between a boy who reluctantly runs the garage he has inherited and an exasperatingly unpredictable girl who's one day dumped on his forecourt. Even without the hints that the girl behaves as she does because she lost loved ones in the 2011 tsunami, this would be a thrilling take on modern relationships; like *Chungking Express*, it has the spontaneity and zest of French New Wave classics.

The festival's Grand Prize went to Pema Tseden's magnificent *Tharlo*, the Tibetan auteur's fifth feature and the film in which he decisively transcends the influence of Abbas Kiarostami. *Tharlo* (played by theatre actor Shide Nyima) is a rootless, jobbing shepherd, raising sheep on rented land, who's one day told to get an ID card. This baffling demand entails a trip into town to have his photo taken, a trip which eventually costs him everything he has – including, ironically, his identity. No one could doubt that the film offers an accurate spot-sample of present-day life in provincial Qinghai, from tawdry beauty salons to Tibetan hip-hop concerts, but symbolic meanings also loom pretty large: *Tharlo*'s one claim to fame, for example, is the fact that he can recite entire Mao speeches in Chinese. Shooting in sharp monochrome, Pema Tseden uses extended takes both indoors (cramped, cluttered interiors) and outdoors (vistas of mountains, plains and dirt roads) to build a picture of Tibet's cultural and economic agony. Cutting social comment with a philosophical edge worthy of Samuel Beckett. 📺



Devastated: Zhao Liang's documentary about environmental disaster in Inner Mongolia *Behemoth*

DARK NIGHT OF THE POLE

David Lynch's collaboration with Marek Zebrowski is the most filmic music the director has made – and maybe that's a problem

By Sam Davies

Distant clanking – is it marching boots, machinery, a train? Heavy, humid hissing which melts into synthesiser chords that swell and loom out of the dark; discordant drips and drops of piano, like the remnants of glass being knocked out from around a broken window-frame. This is how *Polish Night Music*, a musical collaboration between David Lynch and the Polish composer and concert pianist Marek Zebrowski, begins and goes on for nearly 80 minutes. Perfect B-movie length, you might think, and certainly *Polish Night Music* sounds the most obviously filmic of the items in Lynch's steadily expanding discography – at times like a score in search of a film. Lynch's musical career has to date stayed within the boundaries of pop, from mutant blues rock (*BlueBob*) to sunny electro-pop ('Good Day Today' on the album *Crazy Clown Time*). But *Polish Night Music* is an impressionistic drift, Lynch daubing washes of synth colour in the background, Zebrowski adding piano detail in the foreground.

The pair first met at the Camerimage festival in Lodz; Zebrowski went on to work as a translator when Lynch shot scenes for *Inland Empire* (2006) in Poland. Having discovered a musical affinity, Lynch invited Zebrowski to Los Angeles, where they recorded the sessions that became *Polish Night Music*. An excerpt made it into the *Inland Empire* soundtrack, and the full collaboration released as a very limited CD edition in 2007 before this wider vinyl rerelease.

According to Zebrowski, "Poland is a landscape that continues to remain at once familiar and completely alien to me." The same could be said of America for Lynch, or at any rate for the typical viewer watching Lynch's presentation of America in his films. Lynch's only comment on *Polish Night Music* is more enigmatic: "We don't know what will happen." The statement implies an ambiguous chronology: we don't know what will happen in the course of the record, or to the record, or after it finishes? Or ever, about anything? Lynch is surely alluding, though, to the centrality of improvisational methods in making the record.

Improvisation has slowly grown in importance for Lynch. According to Angelo Badalamenti, for years Lynch's musical interpreter, the love theme for *Twin Peaks* was written in a single sitting, at Lynch's prompting. Clips are on YouTube of Badalamenti telling the story for a BBC documentary: Badalamenti, at the keyboard, recalls the verbal cues that he had to pick up and interpret in real time from an increasingly agitated Lynch: "We're in a dark wood, Angelo... There's a girl called Laura Palmer... Let it build, she's coming closer!" But the improvisation started before that: during the filming of *Blue Velvet* (1986), when it was decided at short notice that Isabella Rossellini needed a song to sing, Lynch scribbled down almost instantly the lyrics for 'Mysteries of Love' for Badalamenti to set.



Rush job: Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet* singing 'Mysteries of Love,' written at short notice



Malevolence and mannequins: Lynch's video for the song 'Crazy Clown Time'

Improvisation took on a new importance for *Inland Empire*: "I've never worked on a project in this way before," Lynch said in interview. "I don't know exactly how this thing will finally unfold... This film is very different because I don't have a script. I write the thing scene by scene and much of it is shot and I don't have much of a clue where it will end. It's a risk, but I have this feeling that because all things are unified, this idea over here in that room will somehow relate to that idea over there in the pink room."

It's tempting to take the gloom of Lynch's music with Zebrowski as night to the day of his more recognisably pop work

First thought, best thought, to quote Allen Ginsberg. For Lynch, throwing away scripts, plans and maps is meant to be a shortcut, a way of tapping into the psychic turbulence beneath



Angelo Badalamenti and Lynch



Lynch and Marek Zebrowski

PRIMAL SCREEN THE WORLD OF SILENT CINEMA



A superb new website reveals some of the mysteries and excitements of London cinema a century ago

By Bryony Dixon

Well this is right up my street: a beautiful website called London's Silent Cinemas from Chris O'Rourke at University College London. It feels like a labour of love but is actually an academic project. It brings together all the surviving data on London's cinemas from the silent era (from the first few movie houses in 1906 up to about 1930), which you can access via a map of the city or through a tour of the great venues of the West End; there's presumably capacity for more tours or themes to be built on. The map works well and the site is well illustrated. A great deal of labour went into this, collating a lot of sources: references in trade papers, official surveys, police reports and a host of research papers which I first heard at the annual British Silent Film Festival, an event that aims to revivify interest in our early cinema history. Projects like this are exactly what was envisaged when the festival was established in 1998, bringing together individual studies to form a new history of British cinema.

What is the serious academic intent behind this bit of work? After all, the information has been available in various surveys and books (I have my own pre-internet version of this map at home, fashioned from a photocopied page of the A-Z and covered in inky splodges). How information is presented is important, though. In this case the picture probably is worth a thousand words: the map instantly tells you something about cinema in a large capital city in the era of silent film; you don't need a background in film history to get a sense of scale and distribution. And there is great potential for comparison. I'd like to see a similar map of silent era cinemas in other cities, particularly Manchester, which in 1914 had more cinemas per head of population than anywhere in the country, even London – perhaps a map would show why.

As more and more small bits of information are gathered together from multiple sources, helped by the increasing pace of digitisation, we can begin to do more than speculate about certain unanswered questions to do with cinemas in the early years of the film industry. Good information on audiences, reception and the experience of cinema-going has been elusive and anecdotal. In the next few years, as we add data to sites like this one, we will begin joining the dots to create a more comprehensive and comprehensible picture of our early cinema culture.

What the site also does well to reveal individual, often surprising stories about these cinemas, rather than the generalities found in most history books. At the Embassy, Holborn we find London's first black cinema proprietor, American entrepreneur George

The map instantly tells you something about cinema in a large city in the era of silent film



The Palais de Luxe Cinema (later the Windmill)

Lattimore. He came from New York in 1919 as manager of a popular jazz band, the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, and tried his hand at film exhibition in a short-lived experiment in 1923 at this unsuccessful site in Holborn, which before he took over had briefly been advertised as London's only venue for short films. At the Palais de Luxe, in Great Windmill Street, we find the first female arthouse programmer, Elsie Cohen, who showed silent titles like *The Last Laugh* and *Metropolis* as cinemas were converting to sound in 1930, providing continuity for the discerning cinephile during that awkward hiatus. She moved on in 1931 to programme films at the Academy Cinema, the legendary repertory house in Oxford Street.

Audiences of all kind were served. By the late 1920s you could find the best 'arthouse' films at the Avenue, 101 Shaftesbury Avenue, or big marquee titles at the Tivoli in the Strand. At the New Gallery, Regent Street, we find pretensions to grandeur and a posh clientele – Queen Alexandra visited in 1916 and Queen Mary in 1927. At the other end of Regent Street was the legendary Polytechnic, site of Britain's first commercial film show on 21 February 1896 (reopened in 2015 as the Regent Street Cinema). Less respectable was the Piccadilly Circus Cinematograph Theatre: during World War I it was inspected by an all-woman crack team sent in by the Metropolitan Police to check out allegations of sexual depravity, probably hoping to prevent conscripts contracting STDs.

Areas of cities like London had unique characteristics that rubbed off on the cinemas that were established there. Chris O'Rourke's introductory essay cites the journalist E.V. Lucas, writing in 1922, who thought "that cinemas, like motor cars, tube trains and other modern inventions, had done their best to change the character of London. But, he said, 'they are not strong enough. London merely adds them to her system and remains London still.'"

In an age of snowballing uniformity it would be nice to think this was still the case. ☹

i More information can be found at www.londonsilentcinemas.com

the veneer of the everyday. It's tempting to take the amorphous gloom of Lynch's music with Zebrowski as night to the day of his more recognisably pop work, with its lyrics, verses, choruses and four-minute arrangements. The track titles from *Polish Night Music* are so *noir* as to be tongue-in-cheek: 'Night: City Back Street', 'Night: A Woman on a Dark Street'. In his recently republished book *England's Hidden Reverse*, the critic David Keenan has written about the "night-side" imagery – evocations of genocide, serial murder, sexual violence – pervading the output of early industrial bands such as Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse and Nurse with Wound, their provocations framed as the seething id to the superego of mainstream pop music. The tropes invoked by *Inland Empire* and *Polish Night Music* fit Keenan's vision of the night-side: abduction, murdered prostitutes, midnight trains, the occult and unspeakable.

But improvisation is a gamble, and on *Polish Night Music* it doesn't always pay off. Presented in long, unedited cuts – 'Night: Interiors' alone runs over 26 minutes – the duo's wandering often leads them down dead ends. It's partly the instrumentation: that combination of looming synthesiser beds and spidery piano filigree has been used for countless schlocky film and TV thrillers. But perhaps, too, Lynch's musical vision has been left behind by recent developments. The last ten years have seen a surge of underground interest in the synthesiser, with cinema a major reference point, from Tangerine Dream's soundtracks for William Friedkin to the saw-edged arpeggios in the scores of John Carpenter (another director-composer). The tag 'power ambient' has been applied to the dense, droning textures of artists like Ben Frost, Motion Sickness of Time Travel and Paul Jebeanasam. Most Lynch-like is Daniel Lopatin, aka Oneohtrix Point Never, who uses synths and sampling to create halls of musical mirrors. Lopatin's best work has a dream logic shared with *Mulholland Drive* or *Inland Empire*, the nagging sense of a conspiracy that can almost be unknotted, a persecution that can perhaps be escaped. Such uncanny effects abound in Lynch's filmography, but in his discography they're elusive. *Polish Night Music* sounds, in the end, frustratingly un-uncanny – too *heimlich*.

Lynch's music has always been received less enthusiastically than his films; but perhaps as a director-turned-musician he's struggling under a handicap. It's remarkable how much more malevolent a track such as 2012's 'Crazy Clown Time' seems once you see the Lynch-directed video (in which an assortment of low-lives at a backyard barbecue twitch like mannequins and set their own mohicans on fire). Does *Polish Night Music* feel disappointingly two-dimensional because it is uncomplicated by the visual? Creating undertows and cross-currents as sound and image push against or in concert with each other is one of Lynch's trademarks. Are we spoiled when approaching a film director's musical work? Perhaps we should be willing to work a little harder and put a little more effort into projecting our own mental movies to match the soundtrack. ☹

i *Polish Night Music* is available on vinyl from www.sacredbonesrecords.com

FROM THE PRODUCER **LEE CHANGDONG**,
DIRECTOR OF **SECRET SUNSHINE** AND **POETRY**

PICK OF THE WEEK - GUARDIAN GUIDE



"A COMPELLING, ALWAYS UNEXPECTED AND, IN
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Reviews



72 Creed

In this surprisingly thoughtful and stylish reboot, Michael B. Jordan's Adonis is far more nuanced than Apollo ever was – Ryan Coogler has revitalised a seemingly decrepit movie property and elicited a little grace from the old Expendable himself.



60 Films of the Month



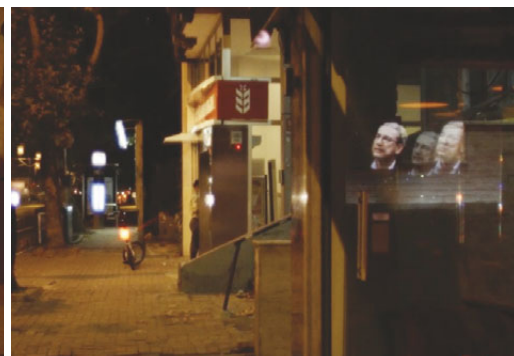
68 Films



94 Home Cinema



104 Books



Obscure objects of desire: Grant Gee's multifaceted film uses the artefacts in Orhan Pamuk's museum to accompany direct readings from his novel

Innocence of Memories Orhan Pamuk's Museum & Istanbul

United Kingdom/Ireland/Italy/France 2015
Director: Grant Gee

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

Grant Gee is rapidly becoming the most reliably intriguing British cine-essayist since Patrick Keiller. Having initially established himself with music videos and probing portraits of the rock bands Radiohead (*Meeting People Is Easy*, 1998) and Joy Division (*Joy Division*, 2007), in 2011 he made *Patience (After Sebald)*, which he described as an "unravelling" of W.G. Sebald's 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn*, teasing out its layered conjoining of topics from varied perspectives: geographical, psychogeographical, autobiographical, historical, architectural, psychoanalytical and creative. Anything but a dry arts documentary, it engaged closely with the text on a level rarely encountered in film.

Like the earlier film, *Innocence of Memories* offers a multifaceted engagement with a single creative work, in this case Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's 2008 novel *The Museum of Innocence*. Also as before, prior familiarity with the text is not essential (a précis of the narrative threads through Gee's documentary), though anyone taken with the film is more than likely to want to

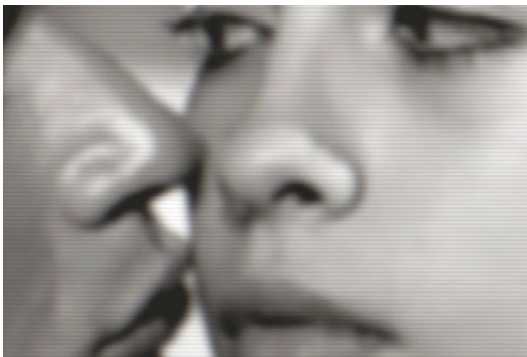
read it afterwards. However, a key difference here is that, unlike Sebald, who died in 2001, Pamuk is not only alive but a major contributor to the film, not just on screen but also as the author of a narration in which a fictional character named Ayla – an extremely peripheral presence in the text – recalls her personal memories of the novel's long-deceased Füsün, the lover of its protagonist Kemal (also heard on the soundtrack, reading from the book's first-person narration). Ayla's 'memories' feature alongside reflections from real-life cultural figures, various working-class Istanbul denizens and Pamuk himself.

As with the Sebald project, this multilayered treatment, blithely blending fact and fiction, proves singularly appropriate to its highly unusual source. Pamuk's novel exists both as a published text and as a real Istanbul museum (opened in 2012), whose contents the author amassed from the mid-1990s onwards and which ultimately informed the writing. In turn, the writing funded the museum, which was built with Pamuk's Nobel prize money. Pamuk considers both the novel and the museum to be two parts of the same work (Ayla affirms that "collecting objects is like collecting stories too"), each containing 83 parallel sections – chapters/cabinets. Ayla claims that the museum was established in Füsün's family home, and Pamuk's own tour-guide recording explains that all the objects are designed to give a fully rounded portrait of Füsün herself, paying

particular attention to things that had been "thrown away, been lost, been looked down on and crushed underfoot". In the most memorable exhibit, the stubs of the 4,213 cigarettes that she smoked during her affair with Kemal, visibly lipstick-stained, are pinned in a glass cabinet as if they were exotic butterflies, meticulously annotated with dates and contextual descriptions, which sometimes take the form of tantalisingly untranslated questions.

In one interview, newly shot for the film but glimpsed on televisions visible from the street, as though this were Istanbul's sole broadcast entertainment, Pamuk denies that his project is a Borgesian conceit, pointing out that half the visitors to the museum haven't read the novel – they regard it as just another Istanbul cultural attraction. But there is nonetheless something exceptional about a novelist gathering together the objects that he's writing about so that they're real and tangible in front of him, even if much of their physically imprinted history had necessarily to be faked. (Whoever once

The film blithely blends fact and fiction, appropriate to its highly unusual source as a novel that exists both as a text and as a real museum in Istanbul



sported the lipstick now imprinted on those cigarette ends, it clearly wasn't the fictional Füsün; nor can she have been one of the bathing beauties featured in a newspaper clipping.) Co-producer Keith Griffiths has previously worked extensively with the Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer, who has a similarly fetishistic approach to well-worn objects, arguing that the appearance of what he calls their "inner life" (which can be divined through any of the five senses) is an essential underpinning of his art.

Direct readings from, and paraphrases of, the relevant parts of the novel are accompanied in Gee's film by close-ups of these objects, often more suggestively than directly illustrative. (A reference to Füsün's childish sulks is accompanied by a shot of a child's shoe, into which has been stuffed a small white sock.) Sometimes the symbolism is more overt, seen to best effect in a pharmacist's cutaway model of a human body, with numbered pills illustrating which remedy is most efficacious for which organ – although Pamuk is concerned more with Kemal's melancholic anatomy than with the physical kind. Just as Milan Kundera devoted an entire chapter of his 1984 novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* to explaining the differences between the Czech 'litosť' and the English 'melancholy', so Pamuk explores the peculiarly Turkish connotations of the not-quite-equivalent word 'hüzün', which also contains elements of introversion, and an aversion to becoming

successful or rich. (Hence Kemal's fundamental uncertainty about marrying his well-connected fiancée Sibel, over and above the fact that he's having an affair with the far less elevated Füsün, whom Sibel dismisses as "a common shop girl").

Some genuine artefacts appear in the film in the form of vintage photographs by Ara Güler, nicknamed 'the Eye of Istanbul'. Pamuk

(through Ayla) claims that Güler's work is so familiar to Istanbul natives of his generation that it feeds into and occasionally blurs their own first-hand memories (a recurring theme sees Ayla contrasting present-day Istanbul with her recollections of the 1970s). Güler's own memories are imprinted on some two million negatives, which the now octogenarian photographer promises will soon be organised and catalogued in a museum of their own. However, not all the photographs we see are entirely true to source: some have been doctored so that Füsün appears in them, the viewer's eye drawn to her by the red top she's sporting in an otherwise monochrome image. There are also extracts from the actual Turkish film melodramas that the fictional Kemal and Füsün watched during their affair, many of which feature actress Türkan Soray. (Güler and Soray both contribute original interviews.)

Throughout the film, Gee's constantly gliding (and self-operated) camera interrogates Istanbul's backstreets and distant neighbourhoods, "those ancient pavements and streets where only shadows move at night", with the street lighting bathing everything from architectural features to stray dogs (whose alleged 'genocide' was a by-product of attempts to clean up the city) in a baleful orange-yellow. An inveterate nocturnal wanderer himself (albeit more recently with bodyguards in tow, following controversial comments on volatile topics), Pamuk professes his love for the city's filth and decrepitude – at one point a map of his favourite streets (complete with the novel's key locations highlighted – it's simultaneously a literal and mental map) is projected on to a copy of the book, as if to imbue his text with their essence. The museum itself is very dimly lit, to maintain the desired patina of peeling paint and layers of dust, and the only daylight images of Istanbul come courtesy of still photographs or fuzzy archive footage.

Pamuk uses the phrase "a galaxy of signs" to describe how all these elements come together in both textual and museum form, and laments what happens when the originals are destroyed, even if only in such a seemingly superficial form as changing the name of a street. At the very end, Pamuk claims he doesn't want to exaggerate his love for the city, but by this stage it's clear that it's an affair of far greater longevity than that of Kemal and Füsün. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Janine Marmot
Keith Griffiths
Original Narration
Written by
Orhan Pamuk
Edited by
Grant Gee
Film Editor
Jerry Chater
Music Composed by
Leyland Kirby
Sound Designer
Jerry Chater

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present a Hot Property production in co-production with Illuminations Films, Venom, In Between

Art Film and Vivo Film and in association with Finite Films, Arte France-La Lucarne
A film by Grant Gee
Made with the support of the BFI's Film Fund
Executive Produced by
Beatrice Bordone Bulgari
Marta Donzelli
Lizzie Francke

Amy Gardner
Teresa Gilchrist
Gregorio Paonessa
Keith Potter
Luciano Rigolini

Cast
Pandora Colin
Ayla
Mehmet Ergen
Kemal
Suleyman Fidaye
taxi driver

Dursun Saka
ragpicker
Türkan Soray
actress
Alparslan Bulut
ferry man
Ara Güler
photographer
Orhan Pamuk
himself
Emre Ayvaz
Orhan Pamuk's interviewer

In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Soda Pictures

An exploration of Orhan Pamuk's 2008 novel *The Museum of Innocence*, paying particular attention to its Istanbul locations. The film also explores the book's use of objects both as physical embodiments of memory and as exhibits in the museum that Pamuk developed while writing the book (it opened in Istanbul in 2012, though the initial amassing of its contents predated the novel's composition). We hear from Pamuk himself, photographer Ara Güler, actress Türkan Soray and from some of Istanbul's

night workers, but much of the film is narrated by Ayla, one of the novel's peripheral characters. The contributors reflect on the nature of memory, the Westernisation of Istanbul, the novel's social and cultural issues, the anatomy of Turkish melancholy, Pamuk's own controversial career, Turkish politics and the numerous connections between the novel's text, the museum's exhibits and the various genuine locations in which Pamuk's fictional characters lived, loved and prematurely died.

Joy

USA 2015

Director: David O. Russell

Certificate 12A 124m 5s

Reviewed by Graham Fuller

Prior to directing Jennifer Lawrence in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), David O. Russell brought a screwball energy and garrulousness to *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), *Three Kings* (1999), *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) and *The Fighter* (2010) that seemed as relishable a reason to make those movies as their unscrewball-ish themes. Though *Silver Linings* was ostensibly about mental illness and the subsequent *American Hustle* (2013) was prompted by the FBI's late-70s Abscam sting operation, Lawrence's appealingly nervy performances as the recovering sex addict in the former and the cheated-on wife in the latter pushed Russell closer to the original spirit of screwball comedy as a genre for depicting the battle of the sexes. Had Lawrence been born before 1910, she might have stolen roles from Jean Arthur or Carole Lombard – if not the *haute* Myrna Loy.

Lawrence's working-class aura and winning combination of gutsiness and vulnerability made her a natural fit for the role of the Long Island inventor-businesswoman Joy Mangano in Russell's latest hectic comedy. Joy was originated for Fox 2000 by the *Bridesmaids* screenwriter Annie Mumolo before Russell boarded the project and fictionalised elements of Mangano's story by drawing on the experiences of other entrepreneurs. The director's first film with a female central protagonist, *Joy* is effervescent and has a familiar paciness but this time he hasn't elicited Lawrence's daffy sexiness. By sublimating the attraction between Joy and Neil Walker, Bradley Cooper's shopping channel network hotshot (which only surfaces in the film's closing seconds, when Joy is left wistful by her former mentor's hasty visit), Russell steers the movie away from screwball and on to the terrain of the woman's picture, *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Erin Brockovich* (2000) being obvious antecedents. Eliminating romance – a flashback to Joy and ex-husband Tony's giddy courtship merely establishes that he lacks her capacity for breadwinning – gives Russell room to explore three sociocultural aspects of Joy's harsh education in accomplishing the American dream: the often negative role played in it by members of her dysfunctional family; the significance of stardom in the national life; and the thin line between business and crime.

Joy proceeds as an ironic if not cynical modern fairytale. The heroine's creation of her talismanic \$19.95 'Miracle Mop' comes with a starburst borrowed from Mickey Mouse's animating of his broom in 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' section of Disney's *Fantasia* (like Mickey, Joy is imperilled by multiplying her domestic implement). Surrounding the scrappy, multi-tasking princess Joy and her beloved pep-talking grandmother Mimi (this season's second posthumous narrator following *Legend's* Frances Shea) is a full complement of Grimm-Perrault family archetypes, though they prove as psychologically variegated as those in *The Fighter* and *Silver Linings*. They are: the 'dead' mother (depressed TV soap-addict Carrie); the feckless father, Rudy (he helps Joy pay her mortgage but unforgivably appoints her half-sister Peggy as her representative and publicly demeans Joy); the evil stepmother



Mrs mop: Jennifer Lawrence as the millionaire inventor-businesswoman Joy Mangano

(Rudy's girlfriend Trudy invests in Joy's idea but presses for a return on her investment); the ugly stepsister (Peggy resents Joy's success and, unconsciously or not, sabotages her financially); the vain prince (delusional though he is about his singing skills, Tony gives Joy excellent advice).

If it takes a village to raise a child, Russell implies that it takes a family to bring its brightest, boldest scion to the brink of ruin: the greed, sloth, envy and meddlesomeness that taint members of Joy's immediate circle make it the opposite of the

utopian-minded Sycamores in Frank Capra's 1938 screwball entry *You Can't Take It with You*. Joy's lamenting what "was lost 17 years ago" suggests that she had to abandon her career because Rudy walked out on the family. Her inability to forge a lasting romantic relationship presumably stems from the same cause, but that's a secondary consideration in a film celebrating the journey of a sincere, driven single woman. The late revelation that Joy carries a torch for Neil scarcely compromises her integrity as an exemplary Hollywood 'strong woman' – one who highlights the relative inauthenticity of a certain dystopia-dwelling warrior girl – though you might ask why it was necessary to have Joy pine for a Bradley Cooper character. At least director of photography Linus Sandgren's many close-ups of Lawrence's sculpted face avoid sexually objectifying her; the camera reaches in to scrutinise Joy's emotions as she creates, reacts to crises and thinks on her feet.

Neil's prime purpose in the film is to awaken Joy to the power of 1990s-style TV hucksterism. When Tony brings her to the Pennsylvania headquarters of the shopping channel network QVC, they wait in the forebodingly nave-like lobby to see if she can land an on-air slot for her mop, only for his contact to tell them he's too busy to talk. Luckily, Neil is nearby and consents to a quick meeting. Having calculatedly delayed Cooper's entrance in the film to build audience



Mother of invention: Joy



Joy makes her fortune by behaving naturally and dressing unpretentiously; the slightly austere fiftysomething business matriarch she's become by the end of the film cuts a more self-contained figure than Neil, whose aplomb has diminished since they last met.

When Joy gives herself a third-act makeover to take on the Texan who is trying to defraud her (a gaunt J.R. Ewing manqué), she simply cuts her hair and dons a leather jacket to look like a tough cookie. It's a shame, perhaps, that this conclusive 'battle' scene necessitated her transformation into a 2000-era Charlie's Angel type, yet Lawrence makes it credible by revealing afterwards how scared Joy was. If this element of the narrative seems tacked on, Joy's struggle to retain her patent and her need to fight dirty to avoid bankruptcy show, in microcosm, what swimming with the sharks entails in the American marketplace. Clearly, Russell had to render Joy's acceleration on her learning curve in terms of visually stirring action, since having lawyers write letters and make phone calls would not have made for an exciting denouement. The playful sequence in which Joy escapes from a locked room on to a Californian factory floor to examine mop pieces illegally made from her moulds is an intertextual nod to the stealthy manoeuvres of Lawrence's *Hunger Games* heroine Katniss Everdeen. This may thrill Lawrence's younger fans. Some viewers will wonder when she'll invest another character with the gravitas of her Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone* (2010). As long as Russell is in screwball mode, it may take another director to invoke it. **S**

Russell steers the movie away from screwball and on to the terrain of the woman's picture, 'Mildred Pierce' and 'Erin Brockovich' being obvious antecedents

anticipation, Russell introduces him elliptically: Joy half-glances him from behind as he guides her to a mysterious door leading to the studio. This almost-meta moment augurs the prospect of further explosive chemistry between the *Silver Linings* leads, while playing with Cooper's star power. It puts the viewer in Joy's place as, escorted on to the studio floor by Neil, she listens to his spiel on the historical importance of Darryl F. Zanuck and Jack L. Warner, extolling how immigrants' son David O. Selznick made a star of commonplace American Jennifer Jones (a putative template for Neil's relationship with Joy). He also teaches Joy that a performer's hands are as important as the face in attracting attention, even as his eyes and hers are doing all the talking. Russell lets this falling-in-love scene dangle until the end of the film because his focus is Joy's professional fulfilment.

"The ordinary meets the extraordinary every day," Neil goes on. As the king of this land of commercial opportunity – where even the TV celebrity Joan Rivers works – Neil proves less extraordinary than Joy, who defies his and Rivers's advice to wear a glamorous business suit when presenting her mop on air, being more comfortable in her white shirt. Joy disdains the glitz of the soap stars whose fantasy lives immobilise the depressed Carrie – and who infiltrate Joy's nightmares.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
John Davis
Ken Mok
Megan Ellison
Jonathan Gordon
David O. Russell
Screenplay
David O. Russell
Story
Annie Mumolo
David O. Russell
Director of Photography
Linus Sandgren
Edited by
Jay Cassidy
Alan Baumgarten
Christopher Tellefsen
Tom Cross

Production Designer
Judy Becker
Music
West Dylan Thordson
David Campbell
Production Sound Mixer
José Antonio García
Costume Designer
Michael Wilkinson

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Production Companies

Fox 2000 Pictures presents in association with Annapurna Pictures A Davis Entertainment Company/10 by 10 Entertainment production A David O. Russell film Made in association with TSG Entertainment
Executive Producers
Matthew Budman
John Fox
Mary McGlagon
Joy Mangano
George Parra
Annie Mumolo

Ethan Smith

Cast
Jennifer Lawrence
Joy Mangano
Robert De Niro
Rudy Mangano
Edgar Ramirez
Tony Miranne
Diane Ladd
Mimi
Virginia Madsen
Terry
Isabella Rossellini
Trudy
Dascha Polanco
Jackie
Elisabeth Röhm

Peggy
Susan Lucci
Danica
Laura Wright
Clarinda
Maurice Benard
Ridge
Donna Mills
Priscilla
Bradley Cooper
Neil Walker
Jimmy Jean-Louis
Toussaint
Ken Howard
mop executive
Ray De La Paz
Tony's father
John Enos
Roderick

Marianne Leone
Sharon
Melissa Rivers
Joan Rivers
Drena De Niro
Cindy
Ken Cheeseman
Gerhardt

In Colour
[1.85:1]
Distributor
20th Century Fox International (UK)

US, the early 1990s. As a teenager, Joy Mangano invented a fluorescent flea collar but was unable to market it. Now, 17 years later, she has relinquished her ambitions and works for an airline in order to support her kids, divorced mother Carrie and grandmother Mimi. Her ex-husband Tony lives in the basement of their cramped Long Island house. Joy's father Rudy also moves in after his latest wife dumps him.

Rudy starts dating well-off widow Trudy, who invites the family to her yacht. Mopping spilt red wine from the deck, Joy cuts herself on glass snagged in the mop-head. She invents the self-rinsing 'Miracle Mop'. Carrie and plumber Toussaint become a couple. QVC home-shopping network executive Neil Walker agrees to air a Miracle Mop pitch. Joy borrows \$200,000 from Trudy to make 50,000

mops. Neil's pitchman bungles the demonstration. Joy insists on pitching the mop herself. Her best friend Jackie helps her generate massive sales.

Mimi dies. Behind Joy's back, Rudy sends her half-sister Peggy to contest a cost hike by the mop's Californian manufacturer, Gerhardt. Peggy pays him \$20,000 and agrees to his terms. Joy explores the factory and accuses Gerhardt of a shakedown. The royalty he's received costs Joy her patent and QVC deal. She signs bankruptcy papers but flies to Dallas to confront the businessman who initiated the fraud and embezzled her money. She exacts a payoff and retrieves her patent.

In the present day, Joy is a Home Shopping Network phenomenon and a multimillionaire; Tony is her adviser. Neil congratulates her.



Sibling rivalry: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, normally known for their smart-alec prudery and good-girl perkiness respectively, are cast against type here

Sisters

USA/Japan 2015

Director: Jason Moore

Certificate 15 117m 42s

Reviewed by Kate Stables

It was the year that the long-overdue 'Bridesmaids effect' finally bore fruit: a rich if variable crop of female-centric studio comedies appeared throughout 2015, including *Spy*, *Ricki and the Flash*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, *Hot Pursuit*, and the hit of the summer, *Trainwreck*. Last to arrive is Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's comedy about mismatched siblings who throw one last wild party in their childhood home, for which the portents looked pretty good. Hugely popular jointly and separately as *Saturday Night Live* alumni, sitcom stars (30 *Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* respectively), bestselling authors and fine and playful Golden Globes hosts, Fey and Poehler haven't made a movie together since 2008's admittedly run-of-the-mill *Baby Mama*. But exercising their talents as actors and producers with director Jason Moore (*Pitch Perfect*), on a debut film script written by their long-time collaborator Paula Pell, seemed to promise something rather more special. It's a promise

that goes largely unfulfilled in this amiable but plot-light comedy, which seems designed expressly to engineer the maximum number of cutely daring exchanges between its stars.

The marketing for *Sisters* gives off a whiff of bad attitude – a trailer of tantrums and carousing, an 'R' rating – suggesting *Step Brothers*-style antics. Instead, the film's soft-centred conflict can barely bring itself to pit Fey's feckless party girl Kate against Poehler's relentlessly responsible Maura when, while clearing out the family home, they swap roles for one last illicit party so that Maura can finally "let her freak flag fly". If the film resembles anything, it's a light-hearted take on Curtis Hanson's dramedy *In Her Shoes* (2005), in which disconnected sisters struggle to shake off their childhood roles and come into their own.

Pell's screenplay spins the sheerest of stories around the film's slender premise and gives it a distinctly episodic televisual feel. The run-up to the party is told through a set of talky sketches (a strained Korean manicure; a supermarket standoff with high-school nemesis Brinda; playing party dress-up in a store) that slow the film's pace to a crawl – as does the nostalgia-mining montage of Fey and Poehler brandishing 80s items (a *Xanadu* poster and giant tub of hair gel get easy laughs) as they clear their shared girlhood bedroom.

Determined at all costs to keep the easy, riffing camaraderie that's been the basis of Fey and Poehler's joint comic outings, the script consistently fails to produce enough friction to drive the plot. As a result, unlikely twists have to be shoehorned in to manufacture hostility. Maura is discovered to have been secretly sheltering Kate's daughter, for example, in a late discovery placed expressly to engender the showdown the film's climax requires.

What Pell can provide by the yard, however, is the enjoyable and mildly bitchy back-and-forth dialogue that Fey and Poehler excel at, which is the film's main claim to raciness. Their TV personas revolve around smart-aleck prudery and good-girl perkiness respectively, so the film's cross-casting (a slutty Fey trash-talking, a drunken Poehler swearing and fighting) provides a certain frisson. Poehler's Maura creates a sweeter comedy of embarrassment from her mangled fledgling romance with Ike Barinholtz's genial neighbour James, giving a winning portrayal of a man-shy divorcee who fears that her racy party wear is "less Forever 21 than Suddenly 42". Fey, spikily foul-mouthed as the one-time high-school social queen desperate to relive her glory days before she and her sister become "dusty old twats", is more grating. But in both



As a raunch comedy, 'Sisters' can talk the talk, but it fails to deliver the goods once the 'wild' party gets started



Party animals: John Leguizamo as Pazuzu and Maya Rudolph as Brinda

instances the wafer-thin characterisation and obvious role-swap gags get well worn fast, leaving only sharp-tongued verbal sallies in which an enemy's name is "like a queef on a yoga ball".

As a raunch comedy, *Sisters* can talk the talk (it's the kind of film that gets shock value from Dianne Wiest's weary mother insisting that she's "cuntingly disappointed"), but it fails to deliver the goods once the 'wild' party gets started. Poehler and Fey's rule-breaking is limited to an off-camera bra-flash, a toke or two and a muddy catfight. They outsource the film's truly bad behaviour to *SNL* stalwarts such as Bobby Moynihan's wisecracking party guest, transformed into a cake-shagging satyr after accidentally inhaling a bag of MDMA. Interestingly, the one real gross-out moment is visited on James, anally penetrated by a ballerina music box during a bizarre sex accident that melds girlish dreams and adult shame to provoke the film's only real belly laughs.

This resolute female decorousness looks a tad old-fashioned in an era when TV cable comedies such as *Girls* and *Broad City* (the latter produced by Poehler's production company) routinely show their flawed heroines screwing up (and screwing) in close-up. Even on the heavily regulated big screen, we've seen *Bachelorette*'s graphic blow-job lecture and *Trainwreck* revelling in its heroine's revolving-door promiscuity and sloppy drunkenness. But *Sisters*, despite Pell's interview comments about its edginess, is conventional and highly fastidious about how it presents its leads, in a way that an equivalent male star such as Will Ferrell (who rubbed his testicles on a sibling's drum kit in *Step Brothers*) wouldn't experience. Still, as a pithy IMDb user's pre-release insult ("Two old chunky white women trying to do their thing") reminds us, even making comedy as a middle-aged woman is a provocative act of a sort.

Similarly, in its digs at suburban life ("All the men look as if they're being slowly poisoned," muses Maura of their initially lacklustre party), *Sisters* positions itself as cheekily rebellious – when in fact it is neatly recycling the sex-and-drugs-and-sentimentality tropes of midlife crisis comedies such as *This Is 40* (2012) and 'one last party' movies like *Last Vegas* (2013). In different ways, Kate and Maura are both 'adultescents', unable to establish successfully their own homes and horrified by their parents' attempts to separate from them (Kate rolls on the ground like a tantrum-throwing toddler on discovering that the family house has been sold).

Simultaneously gying and fetishising the high-school experience the sisters long to revisit, the film rapidly becomes a teen movie involving adults, in which an out-of-control 'rager' of a party is the cure for fortyish ennui. Not only for Kate and Maura, who are reliving (or in Maura's case, having a second chance at) their carefree youth. Their party also releases their dulled friends momentarily from middle age, as the sisters command their guests to get "balls deep in joy" to recreate teenage kicks with a potent mix of pot brownies, tequila shots and their hostesses' kicky dance-off to David Guetta tunes.

Moore, who has kept his camera trained on his leading ladies till now, shooting deftly if unexceptionally to keep the comic tempo up, has his work cut out providing the requisite risk and chaos as the party becomes a succession of gag scenes that wreck the house. Abandoning its 'Kate and Maura's High School Reunion' template here, the film slips predictably into a warm wrap-up embracing adult values and responsibilities. Like its insistence on snark and slapstick rather than wit and farce, this meek acquiescence to convention makes one fleetingly nostalgic (as the slicker *Baby Mama* also did) for the robust, high-concept, female-driven comedies of the 80s, such as *Nine to Five* or *Outrageous Fortune*, and their raucous, rule-defying solidarity. There is, after all, more than one type of sisterhood. 🍷

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Tina Fey
Jay Roach
John Lyons

Written by

Paula Pell

Director of

Photography
Barry Peterson

Editor

Lee Haxall

Production

Designer
Richard Hoover

Music

Christophe Beck

Production

Sound Mixer
Tom Varga

Costume Designer

Susan Lyall

©Universal Studios

Production

Companies
Ike Barinholtz
James

Universal Pictures
presents a Little
Stranger, Everyman
Pictures production

Presented in
association with
Dentsu Inc./
Fuji Television
Network, Inc.

Executive
Producers
Amy Poehler
Jeff Richmond
Brian Bell

Cast
Amy Poehler
Maura Ellis
Tina Fey
Kate Ellis
Maya Rudolph
Brinda
Ike Barinholtz
James

James Brolin
Bucky Ellis
John Cena
Pazuzu
John Leguizamo
Dave
Dianne Wiest
Deanna Ellis
Bobby Moynihan
Alex
Madison Davenport
Haley

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Universal Pictures
International
UK & Eire

Florida, present day. Forty-something sisters Kate and Maura Ellis visit their family home to clear their childhood bedroom, after their parents sell the house against their wishes. Party girl Kate convinces responsible Maura to hold one last wild party for their high-school friends. Kate is jobless and homeless, and her teen daughter Hayley has taken off. Maura flirts ineptly with new neighbour James. Kate pretends she has found a job as a manicurist. Maura offers her a loan if she'll agree to act as teetotal 'party mom'. Copious alcohol, pot brownies and a DJ transform the initially dull party into a teen-style rager. High-school nemesis Brinda is denied access and pours blue paint in the pool. James and Maura flirt in the attic, falling through the joists on to her bed. James is injured when hot-wax foreplay results in him falling on to a music box. The house is trashed as the revellers become increasingly rowdy. Kate gets drunk; she discovers that Hayley has secretly been staying with Maura. A giant sinkhole swallows the pool and yard. Maura and Kate fight, and Hayley falls into the sinkhole; Kate rescues her and they are reconciled. Kate repairs the house, finds an apartment and opens a manicure business. James and Maura become a couple. Kate and Maura celebrate Christmas with their parents in their retirement village.



Second Luke: Daisy Ridley as Rey, orphaned youth on a backwater desert planet who finds an adorable droid

Star Wars The Force Awakens

Director: J.J. Abrams

Certificate 12A 135m 10s

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Star Wars: The Force Awakens gives the legions of fans of the franchise what they want – exactly what they want, in so far as anyone can be certain, and a lot of it. The J.J. Abrams-directed seventh entry in the franchise, the first part of a new sequel trilogy, contains a great deal that is familiar from George Lucas's foundational 1977 text *A New Hope*. Once again the key character is an orphaned youth living on a backwater desert planet who is suddenly thrust into the heart of an intergalactic conflict after stumbling across an adorable droid carrying contraband information. Here it's Rey (Daisy Ridley), who like Luke Skywalker before her happens into the company of Han Solo (Harrison Ford, among many stars returning to their roles), discovers that she is strong with the Force and has to face off against a masked warrior of the Dark Side, Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), the son of Solo and Princess – now General – Leia (Carrie Fisher) and grandson of Darth Vader. As the film ends, Rey sets off to train with a reclusive Jedi master – Skywalker himself, who we've seen enter into much the same student-mentor relationship with Yoda. There is even a new planet-smashing Death Star called the Starkiller Base, though the film makes some effort to establish that it is different from the old Death Star. It is, you see, much, much bigger.

And, yes, *The Force Awakens* is much, much bigger than *A New Hope*. The first *Star Wars* film was released more than 38 years ago – a long time ago in a culture far, far away. Its lasting impact on viewers who were adolescent or younger at the time is easy to understand if you look at the contemporary pop-culture landscape – if you were after exotic, rambunctious escapism, George Lucas was the best game in town, apart from maybe Gene Simmons, and I could never impugn a Gen X-er's undying fondness for either.

Incoming generations traditionally disdain the toys of the last, but these movies have continued

to hold an almost sacrosanct place in the popular imagination that is practically unique and, I confess, baffling to this child of the Reagan administration. (The nearest equivalent might be the *Rocky* saga, recently revived to deserved acclaim by Ryan Coogler.) For a young person today to be swept up in the mania surrounding *Star Wars* is equivalent to a child in 1977 swearing allegiance to the Charlie Chan, Mr Moto and Mr Wong franchises, Andy Hardy pictures, George Stevens's *Gunga Din*, Zoltan Korda's *The Four Feathers* or any other product of the late 1930s.

The examples of the Stevens and Korda



Well wookiee who's here: old hands Peter Mayhew as Chewbacca, Harrison Ford as Han Solo

films – both propagandistic, boisterous pieces of Victoriana extolling the image of Brave Little England as she prepared for the Blitz – are most pertinent to *A New Hope*, for they are the sort of things that a young George Lucas would have watched on television in suburban Modesto, lifting their brash can-do heroism and acrobatic derring-do for the children of '77.

Abrams is 49, which puts him right smack in the middle of the generational cohort I discussed above. He didn't grow up watching Depression-vintage *Flash Gordon* serials, he grew up watching *Star Wars* – and, of course, reruns of *Star Trek*, another beloved and beleaguered franchise on which he did an adequate enough rehab job to land this gig. (He is also, lest we forget, responsible for directing the most colourlessly competent entry in the *Mission: Impossible* series.) In *The Force Awakens*, Abrams shows that he's taken careful notes on the moves that Lucas pulled out in *A New Hope* but seemed to have forgotten in the three execrable prequels that began with 1999's *The Phantom Menace*. There are, yes, breathtaking vistas that invite a sense of awe – particularly the views of Rey's home planet Jakku, littered with the husks of Imperial weaponry from the late war, as the legacy of the first trilogy hangs over the film. More importantly, Abrams knows not to use a tablespoon where a pinch will do. Much of the allure of the *Star Wars* universe can be found in the Mos Eisley cantina scene – and yes, there's a reprise of that here too, in a watering hole run by Maz Kanata (Lupita Nyong'o) – in which you're afforded offhand glimpses of a dozen or more critters who'd be at the centre of any other movie. Through suggestion, Lucas built an immeasurably vast universe, inviting viewers to fill in the margins with their imaginations, and creating cult reputations for characters granted only a slim amount of screen time.

The air of ceremony is mostly reserved for the reintroduction of the returning 'classic' cast – R2-D2 is literally unveiled like a piece of statuary, though C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) blunders into the middle of a sentimental reunion in one of the movie's more successful instances of comic relief. There is also a nice callback bit involving Kylo Ren's tendency to throw temper tantrums, and some moderately amusing in-over-my-head bluster courtesy of John Boyega, in the one part



What a trooper: John Boyega as Finn, Imperial soldier who defects to the rebels

that has no clear analogue in the earlier films, that of 'Finn', a Storm Trooper who defects from the First Order. This is the name the recrudescant Galactic Empire now goes by, its fondness for throwback 30s fascist fashion undiminished. Oh, there's a new emperor too, Andy Serkis's Supreme Leader Snoke. (Like the Starkiller, he's also a lot bigger than the original model.) And more daddy-issues melodrama. And another 'oh no they didn't' martyrdom of a character played by a grey-eminence actor – even the shocking twists come with an air of predestination.

Taking on *Star Wars*, Abrams is like someone

Abrams has taken careful notes on the moves that Lucas pulled out in 'A New Hope' but seemed to have forgotten in the three execrable prequels

who has been trusted with the keys to a Maybach – his one job is to bring it back without a scratch, and he does this by steering very, very cautiously. The closeness with which *The Force Awakens* follows the template of *A New Hope* can be explained away, however, as less a failure of nerve than a structural illustration of the basic premise of the *Star Wars* universe. Just as the continuity of tradition in Coogler's *Rocky* sequel *Creed* recalls A.J. Liebling's maxim that boxing "is joined on to the past like a man's arm to his shoulder", so the *déjà vu* of Abrams's film suits a universe wherein Jedi and the Dark Side are locked in continual and eternal combat, a perpetual *Star Wars* for perpetual Star Peace.

To the eyes of this apostate, Boyega, Driver, Ridley and Oscar Isaac, who plays X-wing ace/Han Solo fill-in Poe Dameron, represent an infusion of capable talent. Everyone is fine and no one is outstanding, which few people seem to consider a liability in these days of grand multi-part narrative constructions, when the ball is only really supposed to get rolling after you've invested four hours or more. Seeing the returning players nearly 40 years on is, almost inevitably, moving – I am thinking particularly of one cutaway to a mournful Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) – and while the handling of the dogfights runs to slick tedium, the climactic lightsaber clash gives clearer evidence of these movies' much reported samurai-film DNA than anything in previous instalments. (Pencilling names like Poe and Finn into the dramatis personae, meanwhile, adds American signifiers to the hotchpotch of references in the series' already overloaded mythical junk-drawer.)

What usually comes here is an obligatory 'fans of the series will get what they came for!' – which is completely true, though such resistance-is-futile prevarication in the face of monumental adequacy is a critical cop-out. Abrams is playing conscientious steward to what's widely regarded as a national treasure here, and he handles his business in a composed, collected manner. There are no glaring missteps in *The Force Awakens*, and on such a stage this kind of performance might even pass for greatness – for a little while. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Kathleen Kennedy
J.J. Abrams

Written by

Bryan Burk
Lawrence Kasdan

Director of

J.J. Abrams
Photography

Editors

Dan Mindel
Mary Jo Markey

Production

Designers
Rick Carter
Darren Gifford

Music

John Williams

Production

Sound Mixer

Stuart Wilson

Costume Designer

Michael Kaplan

Visual Effects

and Animation

Industrial Light
& Magic

Production

Companies
A Lucasfilm Ltd
production

Executive Producers

A Bad Robot
Production
Tommy Harper

Jason McGatlin

Cast

Harrison Ford

Han Solo

Mark Hamill

Luke Skywalker

Carrie Fisher

Leia

Adam Driver

Kylo Ren

Daisy Ridley

Rey

John Boyega

Finn

Oscar Isaac

Poe Dameron

Lupita Nyong'o

Maz Kanata

Andy Serkis

Supreme Leader

Snoke

Domhnall Gleeson

General Hux

Anthony Daniels

C-3PO

Peter Mayhew

Chewbacca, 'Chewie'

Max von Sydow

Lor San Tekka

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Some screenings

presented in 3D

Distributor

Buena Vista

International (UK)

A distant galaxy, long ago. The vanquished Empire, now known as the First Order, has renewed its attacks on the Rebel Alliance, now called the Resistance. Poe Dameron, the Resistance's ace pilot, is captured by First Order forces on the desert planet Jakku, but not before hiding a virtual map in his droid, BB-8; the map leads to missing Jedi Luke Skywalker. BB-8 takes up with Rey, an orphaned scavenger. Poe is rescued from the grips of First Order warrior Kylo Ren by a defecting Storm Trooper, whom he names Finn. When Poe disappears after a crash landing on Jakku, Finn joins up with Rey and BB-8; they escape a First Order raid by commandeering the junked Millennium Falcon, falling into the hands of the vessel's original owners, Han Solo and Chewbacca. Together they go to a cantina run by Maz Kanata, where they acquire Skywalker's lightsaber. Rey is taken captive in a First Order attack; the rest of the group join with the Resistance forces led by General Leia – Solo's ex-partner and with him parent of Kylo Ren – in a plot to rescue Rey and destroy the First Order's Starkiller Base. They succeed, though not before Solo is dispatched by his son, whom Rey then bests in a lightsaber duel. Rey seeks out the reclusive Skywalker, with whom she will begin to train.

The Assassin

Taiwan/Hong Kong/China 2015
 Director: Hou Hsiao-Hsien
 Certificate 12A 105m 36s

See Feature
 on page 28

Reviewed by Roger Clarke

Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien has been away for eight years – and much of that time has been spent working on this ninth-century

epic. One of his rare forays into the past, *The Assassin* is customarily elliptical, unusually *wuxia* and full of courtly interiors and cloud-capped ancient landscapes. It stars two of Hou's favourite actors, Shu Qi and Chang Chen. Using Tang-dynasty *chuanqi* traditional stories, which he has loved and lived with since his high-school days, Hou has loosely adapted a tale known as 'Nie Yinniang' (Yinniang means 'hiding woman'), about an aristocrat who as a child is trained to be an assassin by a nun and is then sent back to her family home in Weibo province to continue her career as a killer.

In Hou's version, Yinniang is at the centre of a web of family and political intrigue: the nun is also her aunt; her target is her cousin and former fiancé, local governor Lord Tian. Hou never really explains the family relationships between the characters on screen; that there are two actresses playing double roles is one reason why this narrative has puzzled and even infuriated audiences in the west expecting a straightforward genre film. And Hou doesn't explain at all the role of an almost incidental figure called 'the Mirror Polishing Man', who in the original story becomes Yinniang's husband. It could be that Hou has become so familiar with the material (by all accounts he filmed a huge amount of footage, including much in the way of character backstories) that he forgot his audience's need to be told certain basic plot points. But Hou famously dislikes exposition, and since this is truly a film about exile, he chooses to banish the viewer to fringes of the experience, leaving them outside looking in.

The film is exquisite, a great sheet of jade-coloured water ruffled by the movement of a sword. There's incredible attention to detail in all the interiors and the landscape shots in remote areas of Hubei and Inner Mongolia. It's a film that gains greatly from second or third viewings.

Hou previously cast Shu and Chang opposite each other in the film *Three Times* (2005). Chang lends an autocratic amicability to the largely unsympathetic character of Lord Tian, while Shu brings a sad and resourceful beauty to a role as athletic as it is melancholy. This is Shu's third time with the director; she also appeared in 2001's *Millennium Mambo*, playing a contemporary club denizen who similarly vaults between the kinetic and the calm. But *The Assassin's* closest affinity is with Hou's sumptuous historical drama *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998). One of the most beautiful films ever made, by anyone anywhere, it was set in a 19th-century Shanghai brothel, and as with *The Assassin*, Hou and his team took years to research the authentic period details. (Hwang Wern-ying, costume and production designer on both films, went so far as to source silks for *The Assassin* from India – apparently the authentic source of this luxury fabric in Tang China.) But *The Assassin* is in many ways the opposite of *Flowers of Shanghai* – no immurement in lacquer for the women here, no being walled in a brothel



Killer queen: Shu Qi

and exquisite stasis. The three key players – Yinniang, her aunt the Princess-Nun and Lady Tian – are all running the show and are supreme political manipulators capable of lethal violence.

The fights are over in a flash; there's little in the way of lead-up, just short, brutal bouts, and in one of the best scenes Yinniang fights in a birch wood with the camera observing from a distance. The scene has been held up by some as a supreme example of the distant style favoured by Hou, but in fact it also incorporates the viewpoint of Lady Tian, who at this exact moment realises that Yinniang is the Assassin and later turns up as a masked opponent. This studied detachment

and general refusal to use trickery and special effects has driven genre fans almost to distraction, though some effects are beautifully deployed in what for Hou is a rare supernatural scene, when a smoke-demon attacks a concubine. Hou also uses little except natural light, which gives a fresh and natural look to the whole. Music is used sparingly, with emphasis instead on natural noises from insects and the like.

The Assassin won Hou best director award at Cannes. It's among his very best and most satisfying films, and since he already is one of the world's greatest directors, quite simply and unequivocally required viewing. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Producers

T.H. Tung
 Hou Hsiao-Hsien
 Chen Yi-Qi
 Peter Lam
 T.C. Gou
 Kufin Lin
 Zhao Yi-Fang
 Sze Jaime
Screenplay
 Zhong A-Cheng
 Chu Tien-Wen
 Hsieh Hai-Meng
Director of Photography
 Mark Lee Ping-Bing
Director of Editing

Liao Ching-Song

Editing
 Paulie Huang
 Chih Chia
 Liao Ching-Song
Production Designer
 Hwang Wern-Ying
Music
 Lim Giong
Final Mixer
 Tu Duu-Chih
 Wu Shu-Yao
Costume Designer
 Hwang Wern-Ying
Martial Art Crew
Consultant
 Stephen Wai Tung

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Production Companies
 Presented by
 Spotfilms Co., Ltd.
 Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd., Central Motion Picture International Corp., Huace Pictures, Media Asia Films Production Limited, China Dream Film Culture Industry Limited
 Production Company
 Spotfilms Co., Ltd.

Central Motion Picture International Corp., Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd.
Executive Producers
 Hou Hsiao-Hsien
 Liao Ching-Song

Cast

Chang Chen
 Tian Ji'an, the governor of Weibo
Shu Qi
 Nie Yinniang
Zhou Yun
 Lady Tian

Tsumabuki Satoshi
 the mirror polisher
Ni Da-Hong
 Provost Nie Feng
Yong Mei
 Lady Nie
Lei Zhen-Yu
 Tian Xing
Hsieh Hsin-Ying
 Huji, Ji'an's concubine
Ethan Juan
 Xia Jing, the aide-de-camp
Sheu Fang-yi
 Princess Jiacheng, the Princess-nun Jiaxin
Jacques Picoux

Kong Kong Er

Dolby Digital
 Colour and Black & White
 [1.85:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
 StudioCanal Limited

Taiwan theatrical title
Cike Nie Yinniang

Ninth-century China. In a prologue, female assassin Nie Yinniang is directed by her aunt Jiaxin, 'the Princess-Nun', to kill a government official as he travels through the countryside. Yinniang dispatches him efficiently.

Later we see Yinniang entering the house of another government official to kill him. However, she is moved by the presence of his infant son and fails to complete the task. Infuriated, the Princess-Nun sends Yinniang back to her home province to kill another governor, Lord Tian, who is not only Yinniang's cousin but also the man to whom she was once betrothed. Again Yinniang fails to eliminate her target; she deliberately leaves behind her a

jade amulet, which reveals her identity to Tian. In a wood, she fights Lord Tian's wife, who has dressed herself as a masked assassin. It is revealed that Lady Tian is behind multiple plots in the governor's household, including a supernaturally sourced attempt on the life of a favourite concubine, a rival for her husband's affections. Lady Tian sends troops to assassinate Yinniang's uncle, who is riding into exile with Yinniang's father. During this incident, Yinniang is helped by the 'Mirror Polishing Man'. She returns to the Princess-Nun, effectively resigning her commission. As she turns to leave, the Princess-Nun attacks her. Yinniang fends her off and walks away.

Attacking the Devil Harold Evans and the Last Nazi War Crime

United Kingdom 2015, Directors: Jacqui Morris, David Morris

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

The title of this feature doc is as much a puzzle as it is a description. What exactly is “the Last Nazi War Crime”, and what might connect it with distinguished British newspaperman Harold Evans? The answer soon becomes clear enough: Thalidomide. Over half a century on from the pharmaceutical scandal that left tens of thousands of families across the world raising children with multiple birth deformities, the subject remains sufficiently challenging for directors David and Jacqui Morris to infer rather than directly reference it in titling this follow-up to their assured 2012 portrait of war photographer Don McCullin. There they showcased the emotive power of McCullin’s devastating images of conflict, yet ensured that they didn’t overwhelm the film’s discussion of the ethical dilemma facing him in remaining at a remove from awful human suffering.

The issues of balance are even more significant in this instance, however. For although the archive images of limbless infants (and the living testimony of various Thalidomide survivors who’ve gone on to triumph over their circumstances) are every bit as affecting as you’d imagine, the key theme of the piece is to examine how the reporting of the subject by the *Sunday Times* while the civil compensation case was ongoing represented a legal milestone whose impact is still felt in British investigative journalism today.

Now in his late eighties, Evans, the paper’s editor during that era, is an articulate and persuasive guide through the facts and ramifications of these events, using the image of a prisoner in a very narrow cell to describe the restrictions placed on reporters by the contempt laws of the time – legislation that he eventually helped to overturn through lengthy legal process in order to reveal the shocking facts linking Nazi nerve-gas scientists, German pharmaceutical company Chemie Grünenthal and the beverage business Distillers, which brought Thalidomide to market in the UK.

It’s certainly a complex saga but one absolutely worth telling, and between old TV news footage and an array of newly filmed interviews (art dealer



Headline of duty: Kevin Donnelly

and Thalidomide campaigner David Mason makes a particularly telling contribution), the Morrises cleverly keep Evans’s key expositional thread fresh and engaging by shooting him against a variety of visually appealing surroundings, from Durham University to former newspaper offices and even a New York limo. With so much information for the viewer to process as it is, this could have been a risky move, but in fact it adds an element of the unexpected and helpfully distracts from the potent feelings of compassion and anger aroused by the subject matter. As such it allows the film and the audience to keep a usefully cool head as the narrative works its way towards the devastating historical revelations in the landmark published story. Concentrated and compassionate but ultimately assembled with laser precision, this valuable and moving film confirms the Morris siblings as masters of their documentary craft. 6

Being AP

United Kingdom/Ireland 2015

Director: Anthony Wonke

Certificate 12A 102m 39s

Reviewed by Geoffrey Macnab

It’s hard to work out whether *Being AP* is a celebration of sporting heroism or a study of addiction and suffering. Anthony Wonke’s feature documentary is about Northern Irish champion jump jockey AP McCoy, a master of his sport and a man who lives to ride winners.

Wonke doesn’t provide much background information about McCoy. Beyond a montage of a few photographs of him as a young man, there is very little here about his apprenticeship, his early years or his relationship with trainers, owners and fellow jockeys. Instead the film’s focus is entirely on McCoy at a very particular moment in his career, just as the jockey has turned 40 and is starting what will be his last season in the saddle. He is clearly a man driven by goals, and the fact that he has already been champion jockey many times seems no source of happiness to him – all that concerns him is his target of notching up 300 winners in a year. This requires travelling immense distances by car or helicopter (“If any horse can win any race, he will ride it,” his agent tells us) and competing even when his body is falling apart. Over the course of his career, McCoy has sustained multiple injuries, including as he’s said “lots of bangs to the head”.

One of the fascinations of the film is this double-edged portrayal of its subject – there is plainly something fanatical about McCoy. “I am not the one being weak – part of my body is being weak,” he says at one point, when an injury forces him to miss a few days’ work. He is also, by his own admission and that of his devoted wife Channele, immensely selfish, with a “controlling personality”. His only focus is on the numbers. Channele, the film’s other principal character, indulges her husband’s obsession with winning and accepts that, at least for the duration of his riding career, his work will come before his family. ➔



A life at the races: A.P. McCoy

Credits and Synopsis

Producer

Jacqui Morris

Written by

Jacqui Morris

David Morris

Camera

Clive Booth

Film Editor

David Fairhead

Composer

Alex Baranowski

Sound Recordists

Simon Bysshe

Ben Posnak

David Barker

©Frith Street Films

Production Companies

British Film Company

presents a Frith Street

Films production in

association with The

Bertha Foundation

Executive Producers

Harvey Weinstein

Steve Milne

Christian Eisenbeiss

Robert Walak

Rankin

Christopher Hird

Trevor Beattie

narrator

Michael Sheen

In Colour

[1.78:1]

Distributor

Dartmouth Films

A documentary about British newspaper editor Harold Evans and the campaign he ran at the ‘*Sunday Times*’ exposing the Thalidomide scandal.

Evans first joined the newspaper business in his teens, later becoming editor of the ‘*Northern Echo*’, whose fine tradition of campaigning journalism he continued during his tenure, leading to his appointment in 1967 as editor of the ‘*Sunday Times*’. There he oversaw a dedicated investigative unit, the *Insight* team, which he set to work on the story of Thalidomide, a drug that had caused deformities in tens of thousands of children born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, since the British distributor of the drug, beverage and pharmaceuticals

company Distillers, was then in lengthy compensation proceedings with the affected families, publishing the story would fall foul of restrictive British contempt of court laws. After testing the waters with stories reporting on the lives of the affected children and their families, Evans eventually went through the European Court of Human Rights in 1976 to change UK law and publish the background to the case – including Thalidomide’s origins as a Nazi nerve-gas antidote later repurposed by German manufacturers as a sedative for use during pregnancy, even though it had never been tested on pregnant women. In 2010 the UK government issued an apology to the Thalidomide victims.

← The documentary is made fly-on-the-wall style, and Wonke's camera has access to almost every area of its subject's life. It follows McCoy into his home; it films the doctors prodding at his body; it shows him in the weighing room, in the paddock and in the saddle. It is shot in very glossy fashion, one of a number of recent documentaries (*Ronaldo, Messi, Becoming Zlatan* among them) offering intimate if sometimes uncritical portraits of leading sporting figures. Wonke has an eye for the beauty of racing, and he includes slow-motion footage that can't help but bring to mind Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographic studies of horses in motion. Some of the most atmospheric sequences are of the annual Cheltenham meeting, the most important event for jump jockeys. The film captures brilliantly the excitement and tension among jockeys and spectators alike. It is made clear that here even a jockey as prodigious as McCoy loses more often than he wins – there are telling shots of McCoy and other riders looking close to despair when a race hasn't gone their way. The director is also alert to the brutality of the sport, constantly showing horses falling and jockeys sent tumbling to the ground.

There is a poignancy in the timing of the film's release, reaching British cinemas just a few weeks after the untimely death of flat-racing jockey Pat Eddery, a figure every bit as driven as McCoy himself. What was clear from Eddery's obituaries was how difficult he found adjusting to life after he'd stopped racing – training horses wasn't the same as riding them. In *Being AP*, we see McCoy being asked on a TV show about his life away from the racecourse, and he freely admits that he doesn't know how to cook or look after himself. Wonke's documentary fills us with admiration for McCoy's obsessive brilliance but also exposes his restlessness. He is never quite as good as he wants to be, and the high he gets from winning is all too quick to wear off. 📺

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Nick Ryle John Woolcombe Alan Maher	Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board and Northern Ireland Screen	Keith Potter Simon Ford
Directors of Photography Thomas Elliott Neil Harvey Andrew Thompson	Films production in association with Roads Entertainment and Partizan Films	In Colour [1.85:1]
Film Editors Paul Carlin Kevin Konak	Produced in association with Kreo Films, Victory Productions	Distributor E! Films
Music Andrew Phillips	Made with the partial assistance of Northern Ireland Screen	
Production Sound Mixer Robert Flanagan	Executive Producers Christine Langan Joe Oppenheimer	
©Moneyglass Films Limited	Producers Madeleine Sanderson Georges Bermann	
Production Companies BBC Films presents in association with		

A documentary focusing on the final season in the career of Northern Irish jockey AP McCoy, commonly held to be the greatest jump jockey of his era. Now reaching middle age, he is planning to retire from racing but wants to become champion jockey for a record 20th time before he does so.

Belle and Sebastian The Adventure Continues

France 2015
Director: Christian Duguay
Certificate PG 97m 8s

Reviewed by Hannah McGill

This lavish sequel to the 2013 family film *Belle and Sebastian*, itself based on the 1965 novel by Cécile Aubry and the ensuing French children's TV series, begins with young mountain tearaway Sebastian (Félix Bossuet) very nearly coming to a nasty end while tobogganing in the French Alps, only to be saved from the jaws of death by the jaws of his Pyrenean mountain dog, Belle. The stall is set out: in the romp that ensues, risks to life and limb will be frequent and considerable but deliverance from them timely; scenery will be unstintingly spectacular; and a lumbering canine that looks as if it would rather be somewhere else will intervene heroically in the affairs of men.

The film's convoluted emotional backstory requires even more suspension of disbelief than the physical derring-do – although the latter factor will be diverting enough for the youthful target audience, presuming they can accept the presence of subtitles. Since his mother died giving birth to him, Sebastian's de facto family has been the grandfatherly César (Tchéky Karyo) and his niece Angelina (Margaux Chatelier). The events of the first film, in which Angelina helped Jewish refugees flee across the border, turned her into a heroine; however, her adventure seems to have come to an end when the plane in which she is returning home crashes in the transalpine forest. Without Nazis as antagonists, the film then relies on a breezily handled onslaught of improbabilities: no one is much bothered to find a decorated war heroine, so the task falls to César, Sebastian and Belle; Sebastian's mysterious father turns out to be a man named Pierre who is known to César, lives nearby and has his own plane; and when Pierre (Thierry Neuvic) accepts Cesar's bribe to fly over the forest and look for the lost Angelina, both small boy and massive dog manage to stow away on board...

If the film relinquishes the secret between Pierre and Sebastian rather too quickly for it to have much impact, a spiky friendship between the latter and Swiss tomboy Gabrielle (Thylane Blondeau) is handled better. Scenes in which the two youngsters escape together on a makeshift



This happy breed: Félix Bossuet

raft into a wilderness busy with animals recall *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), both in their spooky prettiness and in the sense they give of children having to step in where adults fear to tread.

The bulk of the film lacks such substance, however, so the crossover appeal for adults is limited. While the first film was a substantial success in other parts of Europe, a UK release for this still seems likely to be a very niche concern indeed, particularly given the unfamiliarity of the original TV series to UK audiences – its title is best known for having been borrowed and repurposed by a Scottish pop band. 📺

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Sidonie Dumas Clément Miserez Matthieu Warter Frédéric Brillion Gilles Legrand	Director of Photography Christophe Graillot Editor Olivier Gajan Art Director Sebastian Birchler Original Music Armand Amar Sound Emmanuel Hachette Emmanuel Augéard Adrien Arnaud	François Joseph Hors Costume Designer Adélaïde Gosselin ©Radar Films, Epithète Films, Gaumont, M6 Films, Rhône-Alpes Cinéma Production Companies Gaumont presents a Radar Films, Epithète Films, Gaumont, M6 Films,	Rhône-Alpes Cinéma co-production With the participation of Canal+, OCS, M6, W9, Region Rhône-Alpes and Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée	César Thierry Neuvic Pierre Margaux Chatelier Angelina Thylane Blondeau Gabrielle Urban Cancelier the mayor Bear Garfield Fripon Fort Belle	In Colour [2.35:1] Subtitles Distributor Studiocanal Limited French theatrical title <i>Belle et Sébastien l'aventure continue</i>
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The French Alps, 1945. At the end of WWII, ten-year-old Sebastian and his adoptive 'grandfather' Cesar await the return of Cesar's niece Angelina, who has been fighting with the French Resistance. Her plane crashes and she is lost in the ensuing forest fire. With no sign that Angelina has survived, but no body either, Cesar enlists pilot Pierre (who, unbeknown to him, is Sebastian's father) to fly over the site in search of Angelina. Sebastian and his dog Belle stow away on board. They locate the fireman fighting the blaze

and the survivors of the crash, but Angelina is not among them. Having deduced that Sebastian is his son, Pierre explains that he was unwillingly separated from Sebastian's mother and never knew she was pregnant. Sebastian and fireman's daughter Gabrielle take off alone to continue the search; they become trapped in the fire but Pierre saves them. Belle tracks Angelina to a deep hole in the ground, where she is trapped. They free her and head for home. On the way, romance begins to bloom between Angelina and Pierre.

The Big Short

USA 2015
Director: Adam McKay
Certificate 15 130m 7s

Reviewed by Vadim Rizov

Michael Lewis, a (mostly) financial journalist, established himself with 1989's *Liar's Poker*, a scabrously entertaining chronicle of his pre-Black Friday time on Wall Street. The book placed equal emphasis on bad personal behaviour and worse corporate practices: pursuit of short-term profits at the expense of long-term fiscal sustainability became the norm, leading to what Lewis characterises in the introduction to *The Big Short* as "the most purely financial economic disaster in history". He was dismayed, after publication of his denunciation, to receive numerous letters asking for more tips from students who'd "read my book as a how-to manual".

Young capitalists for whom quick personal gain negated ethical and economic questions also (deliberately?) misread *Wall Street*'s Gordon Gekko and *The Wolf of Wall Street*'s Jordan Belfort as heroes. Few are likely to make that mistake with the protagonists of Adam McKay's film of *The Big Short*. Many of the names have been changed but their characteristics remain intact: anti-charismatically abrasive Steve Eisman, now Mark Baum (Steve Carell), deeply uncomfortable Mike Burry (Christian Bale, fully conveying his protagonist's Asperger's awkwardness) et al are hardly avatars of swaggering appeal,

reckless or otherwise. Separately, these investors discovered that the housing market was about to burst and profitably bet against it; *The Big Short* hopscotch from one narrative to another.

Lewis's book contains enormous amounts of extremely complicated information in unsimplified detail. To its credit, McKay's film lucidly explicates subprime mortgages, credit default swaps, CDOs and so on, non-reductively defining these financial instruments of doom. These are important concepts that are near-impossible to synopsis here, and that opacity is part of the point; banks took bad loans and packaged them into new financial tools that most of the bankers failed to understand. As usual, it was the public that got screwed in the end.

McKay sugars the complicated medicine by trotting out celebrities to explain key points: actress Margot Robbie in a tub (a nod to *The Wolf of Wall Street*), chef Anthony Bourdain, pop star Selena Gomez. The *Anchorman/Step Brothers* director also indulges a fair amount of his occasional-energy, no-discipline bro comedy, a smokescreen to maintain viewer interest rather than an attempt to connect malefactors' actions and their larger behavioural climate. Most irritatingly, he uses a number of montages to convey time's passage, in which random-ish clips (Ronald Reagan and Britney Spears promoting *Crossroads*) are weighted about equally and leadenly with ironic pop cuts (Ludacris's 'Money Maker', Gnarl's Barkley's 'Crazy'). Eager to do anything to maintain interest, McKay punctuates Baum's dinner with a venally boastful broker at a hibachi restaurant with *Requiem for a Dream*-style inserts of meat being chopped and so on, building the pressure in a redundant and technically sloppy way.

This kind of are-you-not-entertained? gimmickry mostly flails, but such desperate attempts to engage at the expense of a complex journalistic thesis have also been true of the other two adaptations of Lewis's work, which returns obsessively to characters who discover irrationalities in their market and struggle to demonstrate that they're empirically correct. *The Blind Side* (2009) jettisoned half the book's narrative about the evolution of American football offensive strategy for a heartwarming, racially questionable story about a black child adopted by a noble white family. Less offensively, by turning coach Billy Beane into a visionary rebel who fought the system and won, 2011's *Moneyball* transformed the book's insistence on questioning inefficient systems into a celebration of a very familiar type of hero.

Here, as with Beane, Burry becomes a broker who could Lose It All but who is Vindicated, which again misses the point. Still, *The Big Short* isn't quite as big an offender on this score, since it's an (admittedly successful) attempt at summarising some complex talking points, but the scattershot final product is as irritating as it is righteously motivated. McKay's sincerity is unquestionable, but his clarion call seems unlikely to prompt any meaningful systemic change; better to revisit the Gomorrah of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the scorched-earth tombstone we deserve. Ⓢ

Bolshoi Babylon

United Kingdom/Germany/USA 2015
Director: Nick Read
Certificate PG 86m 50s

Reviewed by Sue Harris

When a masked man assaulted Bolshoi Ballet director Sergei Filin outside his home in Moscow on the night of 17 January 2013, it set in motion a chain of events that threatened the future of one of Russia's most revered institutions. The attack was as incomprehensible as it was horrific: acid was thrown in Filin's face, leaving him in agonising pain, with third-degree burns and blind in one eye. It quickly transpired that the masked man and a fellow assailant had been hired by one of the company's principal dancers, Pavel Dmitrichenko, who, in a bizarre echo of Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010), appeared to have arranged the attack as revenge for Filin overlooking his girlfriend when casting the lead roles in *Swan Lake*. A local – admittedly extreme – case of professional jealousy had spilled dramatically out of the elite theatre and on to the pages of the world's tabloids. It was the stuff of thrillers: embittered artists, hired henchmen, random acts of terror and an institution linked to the highest realms of government. For a company patronised by world leaders and held up as the best of Russian culture, it was a PR disaster on an unprecedented scale.

Nick Read's opportunity to tell the story – of what it was like to be a member of the Bolshoi company in a period of ongoing scandal and deep paranoia – was a case of being in the right place at the right time. When the story broke, Read was serendipitously in Russia filming the prison documentary *The Condemned* with producer and co-director Mark Franchetti. Within days, they were on site with permission to film. But as the crisis escalated, the shutters came down and it would take months – and the arrival of new artistic director Vladimir Urin – for them to gain access again.

The film deals with the shocking attack on Filin via television news footage and dramatic images of his bandaged face. The horror of the violence is underscored by the palpable distress of the company members interviewed: in this world of obsessive perfection, where rigid

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Brad Pitt
Dede Gardner
Jeremy Kleiner
Arnon Milchan
Screenplay
Charles Randolph
Adam McKay
Based upon the book
by Michael Lewis

Director of

Photography
Barry Ackroyd

Edited by

Hank Corwin

Production

Designer
Clayton Hartley

Music

Nicholas Britell

Supervising

Sound Editor
Becky Sullivan

Costume Designer

Susan Matheson

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Pictures Corporation
and Regency
Entertainment
(USA), Inc. (in the
United States)
©Paramount
Pictures Corporation
and Monarchy
Enterprises S.A.R.L.
(all other territories)

Production

Companies
Paramount Pictures
and Regency
Enterprises
present a Plan B
Entertainment
production
An Adam McKay film
Executive
Producers
Louise Rosner-Meyer
Kevin Messick

Cast

Christian Bale
Michael Burry
Steve Carell
Mark Baum
Ryan Gosling
Jared Vennett
Brad Pitt
Ben Rickert
Melissa Leo
Georgia Hale
Hamish Linklater
Porter Collins
John Magaro
Charlie Geller
Rafe Spall
Danny Moses
Jeremy Strong
Vinnie Daniel
Finn Wittrock
Jamie Shipley
Marisa Tomei

Cynthia Baum
Tracy Letts
Lawrence Fields
Byron Mann
Mr Chau
Adepero Oduye
Kathy Tao
Karen Gillan
Evie
Max Greenfield
Billy Magnussen
mortgage brokers

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Paramount
Pictures UK

New York, 2005. A group of investors – including hedge fund managers Mark Baum and Michael Burry, trader Jared Vennett, and money-management operators Charlie Geller and Jamie Shipley – separately discover that reckless extension of home loans to unqualified candidates could lead to the collapse of the housing market. Because mortgages have been repackaged into grossly overvalued financial products such as CDOs, an opportunity is spotted to profit by betting against them. Two years later, the investors are vindicated by the collapse of several major banks.



Breaking point: Bolshoi Ballet

hierarchies are respected and emotions are kept firmly in check, Filin's dethroning and cruel disfigurement are like open sores, pointing to a kind of sickness under the Bolshoi's exquisite surface. As the reactions and testimonies accumulate, what becomes clear is that this is no isolated case of artistic temperament going rogue. Rather, the Bolshoi is revealed as an institution tainted at every level: this jewel in the crown of Russian culture is exposed as a false idol, revelling in its own glory while the ground crumbles beneath it. Through the film, the vast community of this restive modern Babylon (some 3,000 employees, of whom only around 250 are dancers) finds a voice – however quiet or limited it may be – to speak out about its experience of bullying and favouritism under ever-shifting alliances of power.

The real drama, then, is not the tarnishing of individual reputations or the scratching at the bright surface of some sacred temple of the arts. The question the film ultimately asks is a moral one: what does it mean to make art in a corrupt world? Tellingly, the beauty of the dance in all its staged glory is glimpsed only briefly. The camera lingers instead in the intimate wings of the theatre, where the sweat, exhaustion and pained faces of the dancers, trapped in a prison of overwhelming ambition and dubious privilege, are exposed in startling close-up. **C**

Credits and Synopsis

Co-director
Mark Franchetti
Producer
Mark Franchetti
Director of Photography
Nick Read
Film Editors
Jay Taylor
David Charap
Composers
Smith & Elms
Sound Recordist
Vasily Amochkin

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Films Ltd
Production Companies
HBO Documentary
Films presents a
Red Velvet Films
production in
association with Red
Box Films, Altitude
Film Entertainment

In co-production
with Bayerischer
Rundfunk,
Mitteldeutscher
Rundfunk, ARTE
Executive Producers
Simon Chinn
Maxim Pozdorovkin
for Bayerischer
Rundfunk;
Sonja Scheider
for Mitteldeutscher
Rundfunk;
Katja Wildermuth
for Altitude Film
Entertainment;
Will Clarke
Andy Mayson
Mike Runagall
for BBC;
Nick Fraser
Kate Townsend
for HBO Films;
Sheila Nevins

In Colour
[2.35:1]
Subtitled
Distributor
Altitude Film
Entertainment

A documentary that follows Russia's Bolshoi Ballet through its 2013-14 season, immediately after the company was rocked by a violent attack on its artistic director and former lead dancer Sergei Filin. In January 2013, Filin was the victim of an acid attack that left him disfigured and blind in one eye. Weeks later, Bolshoi dancer Pavel Dmitrichenko was arrested and subsequently imprisoned for the attack, exacerbating the sense of crisis that already prevailed among the company. The film casts light on the backstage world of the Bolshoi as it comes to terms with the events, using a mixture of fly-on-the-wall and archive footage alongside interviews with dancers, managers and others. The interviewees give a range of perspectives on the history and life of the institution, and voice their anxieties about its future and their own careers. The arrival of political heavyweight Vladimir Urin as artistic director announces a new but still uncertain era for the Bolshoi.

Creed

USA 2015
Director: Ryan Coogler
Certificate 12A 132m 57s



The greatest glove of all: Michael B. Jordan, Sylvester Stallone

Reviewed by Jason Anderson

There are several things that demonstrate the deftness with which director Ryan Coogler handles even the hoariest tropes of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* franchise, but the most prominent is his approach to Bill Conti's iconic theme song, a marriage of orchestral pomp and brass-driven disco that topped the Billboard Hot 100 at around the same time that Stallone's underdog boxing saga staged its own upset victory at the 1977 Academy Awards. Though reworked versions of Conti's theme appear in the five sequels (four of them directed by Stallone) over the next three decades, it receives a more playful overhaul in *Creed*, Coogler's surprisingly thoughtful and

stylish reboot-slash-generational-torch-passing. Along with its inevitable use as a sample in a hip-hop track, trace elements recur throughout Ludwig Goransson's score, which is unusually restrained for a movie that otherwise strives to hit all the beats required of a Hollywood sports drama.

Indeed, Conti's blustery fanfare doesn't arrive in full force until Adonis Johnson (Michael B. Jordan) approaches the ring for the climactic fight wearing a pair of stars-and-stripes shorts, just like his dad Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) in *Rocky I* (1976), *II* (1979), *III* (1982) and *IV* (1985). It reappears one last time in a quieter, jazzier incarnation as Adonis and Rocky make their inevitable journey up the steps of the

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Irwin Winkler
Robert Chartoff
Charles Winkler
William Chartoff
David Winkler
Kevin King-Templeton
Sylvester Stallone
Screenplay
Ryan Coogler
Aaron Covington
Story
Ryan Coogler
Based on characters
created by Sylvester
Stallone

Director of Photography
Maryse Alberti
Editors
Michael P. Shawver
Claudia Castello
Production Designer
Hannah Beachler
Original Score and Songs
Ludwig Goransson
Production Sound Mixer
Damian Canelos
Costume Designer
Emma Potter

Antoinette Messam
Stunt Co-ordinator
Clayton Barber

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Production Companies
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures and Warner Bros. Pictures present in association with New Line Cinema a Chartoff

Winkler production Made possible with the support of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Film Office Completed with assistance from the Georgia Film, Music & Digital Entertainment Office
Executive Producer
Nicolas Stern
Film Extracts
Skyfall (2012)

Cast
Michael B. Jordan
Adonis Johnson Creed
Sylvester Stallone
Robert 'Rocky' Balboa
Tessa Thompson
Bianca
Phylicia Rashad
Mary Anne Creed
Anthony Bellew
'Pretty' Ricky Conlan
Graham McTavish
Tommy Holiday
Dolby Digital

In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Warner Bros. Pictures
International (UK)

Los Angeles, 1998. Adonis Johnson, the illegitimate son of late boxing champion Apollo Creed, is visited at a juvenile detention facility by Apollo's widow Mary Anne, who brings him home to live with her in her mansion. Seventeen years later, Adonis appeases his adoptive mother by working at a financial company while secretly fighting in underground matches in Mexico. Against Mary Anne's wishes, Adonis moves to Philadelphia to pursue a sports career. He visits Rocky Balboa, his father's close friend and fellow boxing legend. Though Adonis tells Rocky about his parentage – a secret he otherwise conceals – the elderly boxer rebuffs his request to train him. Rocky eventually relents, however, motivated both by the young man's persistence and by his own guilt at not having stopped the fight that killed Apollo. While training, Adonis

begins a romance with Bianca, an aspiring singer. After Adonis wins his first local bout, news of his connection to Apollo leaks out and he attracts an offer to fight 'Pretty' Ricky Conlan, a British boxer whose hold on the championship is threatened by a looming prison sentence. Despite Rocky's reservations about his readiness and the Conlan team's insistence that he take his father's surname to increase interest in the fight, Adonis accepts the offer. His training is complicated by Rocky's diagnosis of cancer, for which he is unwilling to seek treatment until compelled by his protégé. Before a massive crowd at Goodison Park in Liverpool, Adonis goes the full 12 rounds with Conlan in a closely fought battle. Conlan wins on a split decision but Adonis earns the respect of his opponent and the British fans.

The Crow's Egg

India 2014
Director: M. Manikandan
Certificate PG 90m 57s

Philadelphia Museum of Art. By this time, Coogler has had many more opportunities to impress, having revitalised a seemingly decrepit movie property and elicited a little grace from the old Expendable himself, who gives a much richer performance as the elderly Rocky than he did in *Rocky Balboa* (2006), his own stab at a franchise coda and potential restart.

Even viewers who have less patience with boxing-pic clichés must concede that Coogler – as the maker of a well-regarded American indie who's been enlisted to perform artistic CPR on a dubious studio project – has survived a scenario that has tripped up many other young directors. He again gets strong assistance from Jordan, his lead in *Fruitvale Station* (2013), a Sundance prizewinner that followed the final hours of a young Californian before his death at the hands of a transit cop. While Jordan plausibly channels the braggadocio that was Weathers's forte, his Adonis is far more nuanced than Apollo ever was, which is not so hard, since the latter was essentially a cartoon version of Muhammad Ali minus Islam and politics. For one thing, Adonis is unabashedly sensitive, getting teary several times and successfully wooing his boho neighbour without resorting to smooth talk.

The fact that Adonis remains a convincingly formidable fighter who values personal fortitude over false fronts of street cred makes the character the very model of manhood for the age of Drake. Parallels between Coogler's hero and the ubiquitous Canadian rapper also extend to tricky matters of class and privilege. As a product of foster homes as well as the Creed family fortune, Adonis doesn't share the straightforward started-from-the-bottom narrative arc that's typical of underdog sports-drama heroes. (Drake has faced the same issue, having grown up in an upper-class neighbourhood in Toronto and entered showbiz as an actor on a teen TV show.) In some respects, he's an alien on the rough streets of north Philly, where Rocky sends him to train. It's a testament to Coogler's faith in the strength of Adonis's central crisis – in which he must grapple with the legacy of the father he never met and prove he deserves the famous surname – that he doesn't contrive a real threat to his economic status. Evidently, failure for this hero means a retreat to mom's mansion.

Another smart update is the decision by Coogler and his DP Maryse Alberti to eschew a high-speed cutting style in favour of Alfonso Cuarón-style long travelling shots, used to exhilarating effect in the first fight scene. Elsewhere, they make a big slo-mo moment seem bigger by having Adonis run alongside members of an urban dirt-bike gang of the kind seen tearing up Baltimore in *Lofty Nathan's* documentary *12 O'Clock Boys* (2013).

Creed is less fleet-footed in other respects, occasionally becoming bogged down by the preponderance of training montages and the initially tender but ultimately perfunctory romantic storyline. But to anyone who prefers the crowdpleasing bravura of *Rocky II* and *III* over the unpalatable mix of faux grit and uncut schmaltz in all the other instalments (including the overrated original), Coogler's effort punches far above its weight. **S**

Reviewed by Naman Ramachandran

Director/cinematographer M. Manikandan makes an outstanding debut with *The Crow's Egg*, a clever little film that puts an engaging and charming face on what is actually a hard-hitting piece of social commentary. The simple story of two slum brothers who are obsessed with trying a slice of an unaffordable foreign food – pizza – is breezy entertainment on the surface, but underneath lie several home truths.

Reflecting the reality of life in Tamil Nadu, the Indian state in whose capital city the film is set, the slum dwellers are regularly given gifts by the government. They may have barely enough to eat but they have television sets gifted by the ruling party, and these carry aspirational images for the residents. So when a pizza chain opens an outlet near the slum, with it come mouth-watering TV commercials for the product. And it's not just television that feeds the boys dreams: they also have a friend who belongs to the other side, a well-dressed lad from a nearby apartment block who has expensive gadgets and can have pizza whenever he wants – and who drip-feeds information about middle-class life to the clueless brothers. The boys seem happy enough not to go to school, instead picking bits of coal fallen from freight trains to sell for a pittance, but it isn't just pizza they aspire to – the older boy wants a mobile phone too.

The crux of the film is the class divide in India. When the brothers finally save up what is to them a large sum of money to buy a pizza, they aren't allowed in the pizzeria. Even when they go dressed in smart new clothes, the kind their middle-class friend wears, they are still refused entry; like many establishments in India, this place only lets in a certain class of clientele. It doesn't matter that the customer has the money to buy a product, he or she won't get in unless they look the part. It is no surprise, then, that many establishments in the country even today have a prominent sign near the entrance that



Pizza to throw: Ramesh

states 'Right of Admission Reserved', a tradition dating back to the days of the British Raj, when places such as the Pahartali European Club famously announced 'Dogs and Indians Not Allowed'. While Manmohan Desai lampooned this practice in *Mard* (1985), in which a dog, an Indian and a horse end up in an exclusive club's swimming pool in British India, Manikandan's approach is altogether subtler. Only long after the film's warm fuzzy tone has worn off does the viewer realise that the director has delivered the classic iron fist in a velvet glove. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Dhanush Kastooriraja
Vetri Maaran
Written by
M. Manikandan
Director of Photography
M. Manikandan
Editor
Kishore T.E.
Production Designer

Vijai Athinathan
Music
G.V. Prakash Kumar
Lyrics
Na. Muthukumar
Rajkumar
Sound Mixer
Rajakrishnan
Production Companies

Grass Root Film,
Wunderbar Films
Pvt. Ltd, Fox Star
Studios Pvt. Ltd

Cast
Vignesh
Periya Kaaka Muttai,
'Big Crow's Egg'
Ramesh

Chinna Kaaka Muttai,
'Small Crow's Egg'
Ishwarya Rajesh
mother
Babu Anthony
Shiva Chidambaram,
pizza shop owner
Simbu
himself, pizzeria
star guest
Ramesh

Thilaganathan
Naina
Joe Malloori
Pazharasam,
'Fruit Juice'
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Subtitles
Distributor

20th Century Fox
International (UK)

Indian theatrical title
Kaakkaa Muttai

Chennai, the present. Two young brothers, known as **Big Crow's Egg** and **Small Crow's Egg** thanks to their habit of supplementing their meagre diet with crows' eggs, eke out a living collecting and selling pieces of coal from the railway tracks. They live with their mother, a factory worker who is too poor to send them to school, and their paternal grandmother. Their father is in jail for unspecified reasons; their mother is saving up to pay lawyers' fees to get him released.

A pizza chain opens an outlet near to the slum where the brothers live; seeing a TV commercial for the pizzeria, the boys are entranced by the sight of a movie star eating a slice of pizza. When the pizza deliveryman allows them to look at and smell a pizza, the boys are determined to taste this foreign food. However, a pizza costs 299 rupees – a month's

earnings for the boys. They perform various jobs to raise the money but pickings are slim until their adult friend Fruit Juice shows them where the railways store coal. The boys sell stolen coal and raise the money. They go to the pizzeria but are rudely barred from entering by the security guard. The boys think it is their slovenly attire that has stopped them gaining entry, so they earn more money to buy new clothes. Despite wearing these clothes, however, they are still refused entry, and the manager slaps **Big Crow's Egg**. Witnesses film the incident and the clip goes viral. Politicians, the police and the pizza company become involved; eventually the boys are made guests of honour at the pizzeria and are promised free pizza for life. They take a bite, only to realise that they don't care for the taste at all.

Daddy's Home

USA 2015
Director: Sean Anders
Certificate 12A 95m 54s

Reviewed by Anna Smith

Virility and territory are key themes in this comedy about warring fathers. Having accepted his infertility, Brad (Will Ferrell) is a loving stepfather to the children of his new wife Sara (Linda Cardellini). He weeps readily and takes a selfie at the moment that stepson Dylan first confides in him. Set up as a contrasting figure is Dusty (Mark Wahlberg), the elusive biological father who speeds into town on a phallic motorbike, quickly berating Brad about his inability to provide Sara with a child. Dusty is the alpha male who's good at foraging and providing, his leather jacket a nod to the animal hide worn by his primitive predecessors. Pitting the two men against each other has the potential for a bitter war – but *Daddy's Home* doesn't seem to have the will to fight.

Penned by three writers, the script appears torn in several directions, not least over Dusty's inconsistent character. Initially presented as a rebellious, hard-living man determined to win back his wife and kids, he has the wit and nerve to undermine Brad one minute but not the next. The competitive set pieces between the two men are rarely convincing, much less funny. At one point Dusty magically turns the back yard into a skaters' hangout complete with a drinks sponsor (just one of many obvious, if knowing, product-placement points). Then Brad declares it "Christmas in April" and, overnight, fills the home with festive decor and gifts. If pushed into more surreal, dark territory, these gags might have delivered, but director Sean Anders (*Horrible Bosses 2*) keeps the tone safe and family-friendly to a fault.

Occasionally, there's a hint of the detailed verbal, possibly improvised comedy that Ferrell has become known for. While training Dylan to fight, Brad confesses that he was himself bullied at school; he breaks down and admits that, for a period, he changed his name to 'Devon



Will Ferrell, Mark Wahlberg, Linda Cardellini

Lacecock' and told everyone he was blind until they caught him watching *MASH*. Boss Leo (Thomas Haden Church) is also prone to potentially amusing stories about his colourful past, though the actor's shouty delivery makes these less effective than Ferrell's asides.

As for the women, Sara is defined entirely by her relationship to the two men. She has an unnamed job and proves Dusty right when he opines that she secretly wants another baby. A bolder script might have kept this an impossibility, but the narrative contrives to deliver what will make Brad, the challenged male, feel complete. Aside from Dylan's sister Megan, who is also defined by her relationship to Brad and Dusty, the only other notable female part goes to the fourth-grade schoolgirl who has been bullying Dylan. If that sounds like a progressive gender move, hold on: it transpires that she has only been teasing him because she fancies him.

We can but hope that the next project from Anders strikes a more gender-balanced note: step forward Jennifer Aniston in *Mean Moms...* 📌

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Will Ferrell
Adam McKay
Chris Henchy
John Morris

Screenplay

Brian Burns
Sean Anders
John Morris

Story

Brian Burns

Director of Photography

Julio Macat

Edited by

Eric Kissack
Brad Wilhite

Production Designer

Clayton Hartley

Music

Michael Andrews

Sound Mixer

David Wyman

Costume Designer

Carol Ramsey

Cast

Will Ferrell

Brad Whitaker

Mark Wahlberg

Dusty Mayron

Linda Cardellini

Sara

Thomas Haden Church

Leo Holt

Hannibal Buress

Griff

Bobby Cannavale

Dr Francisco

Scarlett Estevez

Megan

Owen Wilder

Vaccaro

Dylan

a Gary Sanchez production with assistance from Louisiana Economic Development

Executive Producers

Riza Aziz

Joey McFarland

David Koplan

Kevin Messick

Jessica Elbaum

Sean Anders

Diana Pokorny

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[L85:1]

Distributor

Paramount

Pictures UK

US, the present. Brad has been married to Sara for eight months and is proud stepfather to her young children, Megan and Dylan. He was rendered infertile three years ago when a dental X-ray slipped and pointed at his genitals. Megan and Dylan's errant father Dusty returns to town and stays at the family home. Brad has an accident parking Dusty's motorbike and damages a wall. Dusty suggests that Sara wants another baby, undermining Brad's confidence. Brad shows Dusty around Panda radio station, where he works; Dusty impresses the boss and is given a job voicing a new Panda jingle. Dusty insists that Brad fire Griff, the handyman hired to fix the wall, so that they can do the work themselves; as a result, Brad is accused of being racist, as Griff is black. Dusty befriends Griff, who becomes a regular visitor. Brad and Dusty work together teaching Dylan to fight back against school bullies. Dusty introduces Brad and Sara to a famous fertility doctor, who says that Brad has a chance of fathering a child. Brad and Dusty become competitive, culminating in Brad getting drunk at a basketball game and yelling abuse at the crowd. He moves out of the family home. Dusty takes on fatherly duties but becomes overwhelmed and decides to leave town; Griff informs Brad, who persuades Dusty to stay. The pair attend a Daddy Daughter Dance with Megan.

Later, Brad and Sara have a baby boy, named Griff. Dusty has a new girlfriend, who has a child with a biker father. Further stepfather rivalry seems likely.

Essex Boys The Truth

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Christopher Matthews
Certificate 18 117m 39s

Reviewed by Alan Morton

Adapted from Bernard O'Mahoney's 2015 true-crime novel, *Essex Boys: The Truth* is a grim, sloppily made documentary of gangland violence told as lumpen procedural. Overwritten and featuring a glut of lurid details, this latest retelling of the infamous Rettendon murders is in desperate need of the editor's knife. We are shown close-ups of grisly wounds and nauseam, given minute-by-minute accounts of the murderers' actions, and even told in which restaurant they planned to celebrate their crime. This tiresome level of detail attempts to position the film in an objective mode, but it is nullified by the lack of any dissenting voices and by having everything refracted through O'Mahoney's ham-fisted narration.

The documentary's tediousness is compounded by the amateurishness of its rendering. From the oddity of having O'Mahoney listed as 'presenter' (can you be the 'presenter' of a film?) to the awkward, often inept camerawork, the film displays its direct-to-DVD fate from the outset.

There have been several film versions of the Rettendon murders, notably the middling *Essex Boys* (2000) and *Rise of the Footsoldier* (2007). In a moment of clanging irony, O'Mahoney (the author of several books on the subject) lambasts the continued coverage of the murders. If the standard of this film is anything to go by, let's join him in hoping that this will indeed be the final account. 📌



Crime seen: Steve 'Nipper' Ellis

Credits and Synopsis

Producers

Tony Carne
Trevor Drane
Brad Moore
Gareth Roberts

Written by

Bernard O'Mahoney
Adapted from his book *Essex Boys: The Final Word*

Cameraman

Paul Skillman

Sound

Stuart Waring

@Moli Films Limited

Production Companies

Moli Films presents a Christopher Matthews film

Developed for film by Revelation Films

An Essex Boys The Truth Ltd production

for Moli Films

presented by

Bernard O'Mahoney

additional narration

Ricky Grover

In Colour

[L78:1]

Distributor

Metrodome

Distribution Ltd

A documentary about the 1995 Rettendon murders, in which three violent drug dealers known as the Essex Boys were shot in their car and killed. Using re-enactments, eyewitness interviews and archive footage, the film charts the Essex Boys' career in crime, from their gangland rise and implication in the drug-related death of 18-year-old Leah Betts to their eventual murder and its violent aftermath. Examining the contested police investigations of the murder, the documentary suggests that those convicted of the crime are indeed guilty.

Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Paul Goodwin
Certificate 15 109m 45s

Reviewed by Kim Newman

The common assumption about British comics in the mid-1970s was that their strongest suit was whimsical if surreptitiously subversive humour in the manner of the *Beano* and the *Dandy* – though there were also well-established if somewhat fusty boys' adventure titles concentrating on military action, with much emphasis on World War II and sporting heroism. Outside of 'Dan Dare – Pilot of the Future' (in the *Eagle*) and the supermarionation spinoffs of *TV21*, there was little truck with the kind of fantastical material that dominated American comic books... until IPC got wind of the boom in science-fiction cinema spearheaded by *Star Wars* and launched *2000AD* in 1977 (though in fact its signature strips – 'Judge Dredd', 'Rogue Trooper', 'Nemesis the Warlock', 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' etc – looked for inspiration more to the likes of the *Planet of the Apes* sequels, *Mad Max 2* and Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*).

The presiding genius of *2000AD* – and of Paul Goodwin's documentary history – is editor and writer Pat Mills, who retains enthusiasm for the comic's aggressive innovations all these years later but is most entertaining when venting about the sorry state of the industry at the time (he is splendidly caustic about the premise of 'Paddy McGinty's Goat', a strip he scripted about a boy and an alien shapeshifting goat). He is also still angry about *2000AD*'s occasional low points, when the dystopian vision of Dredd's Mega-City One was matched by the business practices of successive owners. Mills cheerfully refers to the period when the comic was shaped by the editorships of David Bishop and Andy Diggle as "the dark ages". One of Goodwin's achievements is that Bishop and Diggle, stunned yet mellow and reflective, get to state their case as well as take their lumps. Bishop's interview consists of a lengthy mea culpa about his treatment of writers and artists during a problematic time for the property and a rueful admission that he commissioned 'The Space Girls', probably the comic's worst ongoing saga.

There's lively if implied debate among the creators about the status of *2000AD*. On the one



Comic belief: Neil Gaiman

hand, it was a training ground for the likes of Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison and Alan Moore to embark on careers that took them to DC (especially the prestigious Vertigo line), Marvel or creator-owned American projects. On the other hand, some argue that mostly British writers and artists should aspire to work for *2000AD* for its own sake rather than as a career move. Under the editorship of Matt Smith, in position since 2002, *2000AD* is arguably as vital and innovative as it was in its early days, but even after two Dredd films it remains simply a comic. Under Bishop, there were attempts to launch several of its wholly owned strips as film projects; these came to nothing but still managed to alienate many longstanding creators, who weren't happy to learn that American screenwriters were being paid many times more to turn their characters and stories into unproduced scripts than they had earned for creating, writing and drawing years' worth of the strips.

2000AD rose from the ashes of *Action*, a short-lived comic criticised for its anarchic violence – on the principle, first remarked on by Rod Serling in the 1950s, that putting a science-fiction frame around social comment took the sting off potentially offensive material. With news footage of streets piled high with rubbish uncollected during the bin-men's strike of 1979, Margaret Thatcher's election the same year and the Falklands War – accompanied by driving punk music that (like *2000AD*) actually predates Thatcher but now seems positioned against her regime – *Future Shock* establishes the political and social context that gave rise to Judge Dredd, the comic's most lasting creation. A futuristic lawman who is judge, jury and (often) executioner on the streets of a crowded city – always helmeted, showing only his Desperate Dan-sized chin to the world, dressed in fascist leathers and carrying exaggerated weapons – Dredd is a caricature American hero but also a monster. The strip is at once a straight-up action drama and a cynical satire, though Mills admits to being amused to learn that he literally couldn't go too far, since the worse Dredd was, the more readers loved him. ☹

The Good Dinosaur

USA 2015
Director: Peter Sohn
Certificate PG 100m 37s

Reviewed by Andrew Osmond

When Pixar's *Inside Out* was released in 2015, it felt unique; many of its ideas had appeared before but rarely melded so well. Pixar's latest offering, *The Good Dinosaur*, feels inescapably like 'another animated film', despite its handsome presentation and charm. Numerous other cartoons have had prehistoric characters wending their way through rugged landscapes (*The Land Before Time* films, *Dinosaur*, the *Ice Age* series and *The Croods* among them). One might expect Pixar to find an ingenious metaphor for the modern human condition; instead it offers a slight boy-and-his-dog tale, reversed so that the 'boy' is a timid dinosaur and the 'dog' a feral cave-child.

A below-average Pixar but an above-average cartoon, *Good Dinosaur* feels specifically targeted at children. It effectively starts with 'Once upon a time... there was a little dinosaur afraid of everything'. Arlo, the title character, a long-necked sauropod, is first seen clinging terrified to the inside of his broken egg; later he is swept away down a torrential river and spends the rest of the film travelling back home, accompanied by Spot, a crawling cave-boy with a dog's mannerisms. (You can divert yourself wondering which breed of dog he most resembles.) A witty reverse anthropomorphism, Spot is the film's best creation, scurrying up tree trunks and hanging off sticks by his teeth.

Many of the best moments are wordless, from an early sequence in which Spot tries bringing Arlo food (and looking incredulous when Arlo rejects a lizard and bug) to their teary farewell. It seems quite possible that Pixar, which mastered extended silent comedy with *Wall-E* (2008), could have managed a completely dialogue-free film that would have appealed more to adults. Instead the talkier scenes break any feeling of a sustained reality, though they could have been worse. A turn by a new-age *Styracosaurus*, horns festooned with furry critters, is amusing (he's voiced by Peter Sohn, the film's first-time director), and Sam Elliott is good as a grizzled T. rex, characterised as a cowboy herding cattle – he gets the kind of long monologue, at a traditional western campfire, that's often seen as a sin in animation, but it's entertaining.

The film's main assets are its beautiful hyperreal backdrops, especially the mountains and rivers. Modelled on north-west America, they're a pleasing and exciting stage for Arlo's adventures, though without the poetic pantheism of Japan's Miyazaki Hayao, ➔



Jurassic lark: *The Good Dinosaur*

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Sean Hogan
Helen Mullane
Cinematography
Paul Goodwin
Nick Harwood
Jim Hinson
Editing
Paul Goodwin
Nick Harwood
Jim Hinson
Music
Justin Greaves
Sound Re-recording Mixer
Neil Collymore
Animation
3PS

©Deviant Films
Production Companies
A Stanton Media
& Deviant Films
production
Executive Producers
Nick Harwood
Jim Hinson
Film Extracts
28 Days Later (2002)
The Book of Eli (2010)
Jason and the Argonauts (1963)
Robocop (1987)
Timecrimes (2007)

The Wild Bunch (1969)
The Avengers (2012)
Dredd (2012)
Hardware (1990)
Judge Dredd (1995)
Transformers (2007)
In Colour
[L78:1]
Distributor
Metrodome
Distribution Limited

A history of the British weekly science-fiction comic '2000AD', which launched under the editorship of Pat Mills in 1977 and has survived – with changes of ownership and several successive editorial regimes – to the present day.

whom Sohn cited as an influence. Many reviewers have complained that Arlo's simplified design clashes with the backdrops; I felt that when watching the trailer, but found the juxtaposition easy to accept over the film's length. However, the beginning feels too childish to attract adult fans of Pixar's *Inside Out* or *The Incredibles* (2004), while the film is harsh for child viewers of Disney's *Tinker Bell* films (Arlo's father is killed on screen; a cute critter is gulped down by the toothy pterodactyl villain). In the end, it's probably Pixar's powerful name that will stop *The Good Dinosaur* sinking commercially between two stools. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Denise Ream

Screenplay

Meg LeFauve

Story

Peter Sohn

Erik Benson

Meg LeFauve

Kelsey Mann

Bob Peterson

Original Concept and Development

Bob Peterson

Directors of Photography

Lighting:

Sharon Calahan

Camera:

Mahyar Aboussaeedi

Film Editor

Stephen Schaffer

Production Designer

Harley Jessup

Music

Mychael Danna

Jeff Danna

Sound Designer

Craig Berkey

Supervising Animator

Michael Venturini

©Disney Enterprises, Inc./Pixar

Production

Companies

Disney presents

a Pixar Animation

Studios film

Executive Producers

John Lasseter

Lee Unkrich

Andrew Stanton

Voice Cast

Jeffrey Wright

Poppa Henry

Frances

McDormand

Momma Ida

Maleah Padilla

young Libby

Ryan Teeple

young Buck

Jack McGraw

young Arlo

Marcus Scriber

Buck

Raymond Ochoa

Arlo

Jack Bright

Spot

Peter Sohn

pet collector

Steve Zahn

Thunderclap

Mandy Freund

Downpour

Steven Clay Hunter

Coldfront

A.K. Buckley

Nash

Anna Paquin

Ramsey

Sam Elliott

Butch

Dave Boat

Bubbha

Carrie Paff

Lurleane

Calum Mackenzie

Grant

Pervis

John Ratzenberger

Earl

Dolby Atmos/

Dolby Digital/

Datasat/SDDS

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Buena Vista

International (UK)

Running time

includes preceding

short *Sanjay Super*

Team (c. 7 mins)

Goosebumps

USA/Australia 2015

Director: Rob Letterman

Certificate PG 103m 12s

Reviewed by Vadim Rizov

That a *Goosebumps* movie exists is less the culmination of a long-held dream than the inevitable conclusion to a nearly two-decade push to monetise further an established brand not previously brought to the big screen. At the 1990s height of their popularity, R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* books – a series of unconnected short horror novels aimed at children, generally pitting plucky teens against every conceivable boogeyman – were a substantial commercial force: when the original series came to an end in 1997, publisher Scholastic's overall sales dropped 40 per cent.

Attempts to make a film out of the books began in 1998 but stumbled on a problem not encountered by the TV series also drawn from them: whether to adapt one book and, if not, what kind of framework could possibly contain so many different killer ventriloquist's dolls, carnivorous plants, ghouls et al. In their pass at the screenplay, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski (*Ed Wood*, *Problem Child*) resolve the conundrum by conceiving of a meta-film in which Stine's monsters, once written, become all too real and escape from the page.

Making a horror movie that's not too scary for a six-year-old is a tough proposition. There are a few typical false alarms – a flying bird coming out of nowhere, a sudden hand on the shoulder – signalled well in advance by Danny Elfman's score so as not to frighten anyone too unexpectedly, but the emphasis is more on CGI spectacle. Beginning with the introduction of an abominable snowman, the feel of *Goosebumps* is closer to *Jumanji* (1995) than the likes of *Gremlins* (1984): the idea is to have creatures run riot in a small town, creating group chaos rather than individual terror.

There is, first, some narrative scaffolding that has to be laboriously erected. Zach (Dylan Minnette) and his vice-principal mother Gale (Amy Ryan) have just moved to Madison, Delaware. There is no such place; the film was in fact shot in Madison, Georgia, and why this couldn't just be said is a needlessly vexing mystery. The location has nothing to do with the plot, though, and doesn't even serve as a hat-tip to Stine (an Ohio native turned New York resident).

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Deborah Forte

Neal H. Moritz

Screenplay

Darren Lemke

Story

Scott Alexander

Larry Karaszewski

Based on the books

written by R.L. Stine

Director of Photography

Javier Aguirresarobe

Editor

Jim May

Production Designer

Sean Haworth

Music

Danny Elfman

Sound Mixer

Mary Ellis

Costume Designer

Judianna Makovsky

Visual Effects by

MPC

Vitality Visual Effects

Instinctual

Stunt Co-ordinator

Stephen Pope

©Columbia Pictures

Industries, Inc., LSC

Film Corporation and

Village Roadshow

Films Global Inc.

Production Companies

Columbia Pictures

and Sony Pictures

Animation present

in association

with LStar Capital,

Village Roadshow

Pictures an Original

Film, Scholastic

Entertainment



Monsters ink: Jack Black

That's something to mull as Zach and his mother tiptoe around the recent death of his father while the film takes some opening stabs at non-monster comedy. There's a painful scene where Gale embarrasses herself by making a forced mention of twerking while introducing herself to her students – leave no pop-cultural reference behind. Regular TV comic performers Jillian Bell and Ken Marino are also present to up the humour quotient but have nothing to work with.

Javier Aguirresarobe's sometimes blurry digital photography and the unremarkable small-town setting give the impression of a cut-rate production that has dedicated the bulk of its moderate budget to FX work. The creatures are serviceable, unexciting and clearly more expensive than their surroundings. Director Rob Letterman has a background in computer animation: his skill-set presumably has more to do with wrangling these aspects of production than any affinity for either laughs or scares.

Jack Black's performance as a grouchy R.L. Stine relies heavily on a pinched voice that's presumably meant to be funny. The dialogue plugs his commercial success (he brags about having sold more books than Stephen King, a jab the real-life Stein doesn't like) and occasionally stops for kids to marvel at meeting their literary idol. This is fan service of a highly predictable, innocuous sort and presumably plays well to the kids whose loyalties are being drawn upon, but it becomes comic in a way that's different to what's intended: in this film's world, there can be no more exciting event than meeting the author of *Night of the Living Dummy*. **B**

Millions of years ago, an asteroid hurtled towards prehistoric Earth but narrowly missed. As a result, the dinosaurs didn't die out, but instead evolved intelligence and speech, while humans remained primitive.

In the present, Arlo is the runt son of a rural family of long-necked dinosaurs. He's timid and terrified of everything. His father Henry encourages him to trap and kill a pest that's been stealing their food. The pest turns out to be a feral human boy with the mannerisms of a dog. When Arlo fails to catch him, Henry angrily pursues the boy down the riverbank, dragging Arlo in tow. However, a flash flood catches them both and Henry perishes saving Arlo. Later, Arlo finds the cave-boy stealing food again and chases him, but they both fall in the river and are swept away. Emerging many miles downstream, Arlo forges a partnership with the boy, whom he names Spot. They travel back upriver; Arlo learns to communicate with Spot without words and comes to value him. They are threatened by pterodactyls (who see Spot as a meal) but are helped by a family of 'cowboy' T. rexes herding cattle. Arlo gradually learns courage as he helps the T. rexes fight off velociraptor cattle rustlers. Later, he heroically saves Spot from the pterodactyls and another flood. Almost at the end of their journey, they encounter a human family who show affection to Spot. Arlo tearfully pushes his friend to go with them instead of him, before joyfully returning to his own family.

US, the present. A year after his father's death, teenager Zach and his mother Gale move from New York to the small town of Madison, Delaware. Zach befriends Hannah, the girl next door, but is warned off by her strangely hostile father, 'Mr Shivers' (actually 'Goosebumps' author R.L. Stine). Convinced that

Hannah is in danger, Zach rushes to her house and opens up one of Shivers's 'Goosebumps' manuscripts, unleashing a real monster, the Abominable Snowman of Pasadena, from its pages. The town is soon under siege from the 'Goosebumps' creations, but the monsters are defeated by the combined efforts of Zach and Stine.

The Hateul Eight

USA 2015

Director: Quentin Tarantino

See Feature
on page 18

Reviewed by Michael Atkinson

Unarguably a breed of charismatic megafauna unto himself, Quentin Tarantino has for many become an inviolate quantity in film culture – an artist who creates his own meta-pulp moviescapes, saturated with self-knowing Godardian cine-love and as distinctive from his contemporaries' work as surf rock is from elevator music. This is the yolk of auteurism – loving the art for who the artist uniquely is, for the tonal integrity that demands you watch his movies *his* way, and as much for what the films aren't (faddish, patronising, market-calculated, unTarantino-esque) as for what they are. Nobody does what Tarantino does, and that alone, in a world of copycats and sequels and rip-offs, makes him priceless.

But thinking of him this way, as cinephilic as it is, leaves out the essential matter of whether or not Tarantino being Tarantino is always a good thing, and whether the movies are quite as much fun to watch, or as brilliantly self-reflexive/subversive, as the filmmaker thinks they are. *Django Unchained* (2012) begged the question, and now *The Hateul Eight*, a kind of post-anti-western, makes it inevitable. Essentially a protracted TV play (at over three hours, several minutes longer than *The Godfather*) set in a snowbound cabin occupied by a motley (nine and then ten, not eight) assortment of bounty hunters, outlaws, Confederate vets and other frontier types, the film seems almost conceived to test the tensile strength of our Tarantino ardour and our patience for the man's less enlightened tastes.

Self-consciousness isn't the issue; in fact, the Lean-esque 'overture' and the intermission that endeavours to 'eventise' the otherwise modest film register as fond nostalgia, and give Ennio Morricone's original score a chance to unleash its dramatic roar. Unfortunately, the epic significance the music promises is never delivered. (Should it have been played in air quotes?) Rather, the frontier expanses where bounty men Samuel L. Jackson and Kurt Russell meet and squabble about a coach ride, a prisoner (a feral Jennifer Jason Leigh, forever getting punched in the face) and a letter from Lincoln, are soon relinquished for the cluttered cabin inn, which is as absurdly large as Sergio Leone's frontier farmhouses. Other occupants – Bruce Dern's taciturn Southern racist, Tim Roth's chortling dandy, Demian Bichir's watchful Mexican, Michael Madsen's Madsen-ish loner, Walton Goggins's loudmouth Johnny Reb – bandy about, probing everyone else's reputation and disputing history. In by-now predictable Tarantino fashion, nearly everyone is revealed to have a secret agenda, a secret identity, or both.

In formal terms, Lars von Trier's fiercely ironic *Dogville* (2003) might come to mind, but the comparison only backlights *The Hateul Eight's* deficit of ideas. The means by which Tarantino's stagebound drama-onion is peeled are limited almost entirely to expository dialogue – which, in the man's late fashion, is self-reverently repetitious, over-articulate and methodical. ("Let's slow it way down," Jackson says late in the game, as he plays detective in what feels like a *Murder by Death* riff.) Characters pair off for




This is a holed up: Tim Roth

private discussions, as in a stage drama. Entire scenes of chitchat and eating serve as distended slow burns to sudden splashes of bloodshed. Characters explain things we already understand two or more times, while the almost obligatory doubling flashbacks rewrite what we've seen but do so in mostly unsurprising ways. Of course, the threads are eventually resolved, or abruptly severed, with explosions of gore. The actors more often bark than talk, and "nigger" is hollered and hissed more frequently than in all of Tarantino's other movies combined.

In Tarantinoland, these purely textural cavils are all pluses – either you're in for the indulgences and excesses or you don't come. Indeed, you go off the QT reservation entirely if you dare to wonder whether his characters shouldn't just talk in circles for exactly as long as the filmmaker wants them to, or if hilariously bloodsoaked homicide is the only way he knows to end a story. Sure, you can offer that *The Hateul Eight* isn't as piquant as *Inglourious Basterds* (2009)

or as seasoned as *Jackie Brown* (1997), but to suggest that its redundancies, bad habits and glacial pacing are intrinsically problematic is simply not to get what's there to be gotten. Is it? Or have we raised the bar far above the B-movie hinterlands where Tarantino prefers to remain?

I'm willing to consider either case – it all depends on how you frame what Tarantino is trying to do. Meta-cinematic rogue-revolutionary or narcissistic goofball? Anyway, like most of Kubrick, Tarantino's films usually require re-viewing; their first impressions can be disappointing. (The only oeuvre entry that this reviewer didn't need to see twice – ie appreciated immediately – was *Reservoir Dogs*.) But it may be time to admit frustrated irritation with Tarantino's evolving voice, even if it means questioning a beloved and hyper-literate hipster auteur, in an American desert of original perspectives, whose work consists of 95 per cent dialogue and no CGIs whatsoever. Forgive us for being conflicted. 

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Richard N. Gladstein
Stacey Sher
Shannon McIntosh
Written by
Quentin Tarantino
Director of
Photography
Robert Richardson
Film Editor
Fred Raskin
Production Designer
Yohel Taneida
Original Music

Ennio Morricone
Costume Designer
Courtney Hoffman

@Visiona
Romantica, Inc.
Production
Companies
The Weinstein
Company presents
the 8th film by
Quentin Tarantino
Executive Producers
Bob Weinstein

Harvey Weinstein
Georgia Kacandes

Cast
Samuel L. Jackson
Major Marquis Warren
Kurt Russell
John Ruth, 'The
Hangman'
Jennifer Jason Leigh
Daisy Domergue
Walton Goggins
Chris Mannix

Demian Bichir
Bob
Tim Roth
Oswaldo Mobray
Michael Madsen
Joe Gage
Bruce Dern
General Sanford
Smithers
James Parks
O.B. Jackson
Dana Gourrier
Minnie Mink
Zoë Bell

Six-Horse Judy
Lee Horsley
Ed
Gene Jones
Sweet Dave
Keith Jefferson
Charlie
Craig Stark
Chester Charles
Smithers
Belinda Owino
Gemma
Channing Tatum
Jody

Dolby Digital
In Colour
2.76:1 [Ultra
Panavision 70]

Roadshow running
time: 187m approx.
(including 12m
intermission)
General release
running time:
167m approx.

Wyoming, sometime after the Civil War. A stagecoach carrying bounty hunter John Ruth and his prisoner Daisy Domergue is waylaid by fellow mercenary Major Marquis Warren, who negotiates a ride, along with a young stranger who claims to be the new sheriff in their destination town of Red Rock. A snowstorm forces them to retreat to a cabin inn, which is run by a Mexican and occupied by three other strangers. Stranded there together, they all drink, eat and banter, slowly uncovering a

tangle of lies, faked identities and vicious racism. Eventually, Warren eggs on an old Confederacy bigot and shoots him dead. In the ensuing tension, someone poisons the coffee, killing Ruth and the coach driver. Warren then begins to investigate the truth of everyone's story, and a flashback details how the inn's real staff were slaughtered by the current occupants, all to rescue Domergue, whose brother emerges from the cellar. Gunfights and standoffs ensue, leaving only a wounded few alive.

In the Heart of the Sea

USA/Spain/Australia 2015

Director: Ron Howard

Certificate 12A 121m 33s

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

After building an industry and a fortune peddling fantasy, these days the American studios can't distance themselves from fiction quickly enough when dealing with any other subject matter. The latest product of the odious 'true story' industry is Ron Howard's *In the Heart of the Sea*, which, as per the poster tagline, is "based on the incredible true story that inspired *Moby-Dick*".

Just as many of us, prior to seeing Roland Emmerich's *Anonymus* (2011), had struggled under the delusion that Shakespeare was something more than a political cartoonist pointedly commenting on current events, so *In the Heart of the Sea* sets the record straight that Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, far from being a national epic relaying a universal tale of unchecked pride and man's ultimate helplessness in the face of the unfathomable power of God and the natural world, was in fact a thinly veiled exposé of a cover-up manufactured by the bigwigs of the Nantucket whale-oil companies, accomplished through the connivance of an insider whistleblower.

Charles Leavitt's screenplay adapts a 2000 non-fiction volume by Nathaniel Philbrick collating surviving accounts of the sinking of the whaleship the Essex in the autumn of 1820, though Leavitt and Howard draw on other inspirations too. The tetchy relationship between patrician Captain George Pollard Jr (Benjamin Walker) and up-by-the-bootstraps First Mate Owen Chase (Chris Hemsworth) has shades of Henry Fonda and John Wayne in John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948); meanwhile the use of lightweight digital cameras to wriggle into the Essex's joinery – following the nib of a pen dipping into an inkwell or a knife etching the form of a buxom maiden in a hunk of whale ivory – leaves little room for doubt that Howard and his DP Anthony Dod Mantle screened Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's GoPro-shot *Leviathan* (2012) before they hoisted anchor on the production. There are also a handful of lovely maritime images to evoke



Spear pressure: *In the Heart of the Sea*

CGI J.M.W. Turner, as when the Essex, after her first successful haul, turns by night into a floating processing plant, belching oily flame into an overcast purple-black sky – though by the time the crew have been shipwrecked and left to the mercy of the waves, the movie is abandoned to the disgusting orange-and-teal palette that is the bane of contemporary multiplex cinematography.

In this, the last section of *In the Heart of the Sea*, Howard's clearest influence is his own *Apollo 13* (1995), but by then the rigging of the human elements has become hopelessly tangled. The cast spend much of the last act stripped to the waist to show the results of crash dieting, though this touch of veracity is at odds with the highly artificial nature of the movie's period trappings.

Howard might've done better to go full-on *Boys' Own* adventure with his half-cartoon movie rather than pontificate on the issue of literary production and anachronistic pop-psychology, with Ben Whishaw's Melville playing Dr Phil to Brendan Gleeson's traumatised sea dog. Alongside John Cusack's Edgar Allan Poe in *The Raven* (2012) and James Mason's Gustave Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* (1949), these scenes must count among Hollywood's most embarrassing engagements with the world heritage of literature. In the face of such a gargantuan miscalculation, one can barely muster an awed "Thar she blows!" 

Janis Little Girl Blue


USA/United Kingdom 2015

Director: Amy J. Berg

Reviewed by Sam Davies

Run a slideshow in your head of 1960s counterculture and, along with Hendrix in his hussars uniform, Dylan in Ray-Bans and the Beatles on a rooftop, you'll probably find a mental picture of Janis Joplin, grinning goofily behind XXL granny glasses and a halo of frizz. Her albums – to my perception at least – have had a looser grip on the collective memory. Her voice can still be heard, however, as the pathbreaker for so many female singers who've reclaimed the roughed-up and raw from the preserve of the male vocal, from Stevie Nicks and Patti Smith to Lydia Lunch, Kim Gordon, Kat Bjelland, Courtney Love and even Amy Winehouse.

Image, though, is a key theme in Amy J. Berg's *Janis: Little Girl Blue* – both Joplin's self-image and the image that others had of her. Documentary biopic is a new departure for Berg, whose previous films have investigated sexual abuse – *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006), *An Open Secret* (2014) – and a satanic panic and miscarriage of justice in *West of Memphis* (2012). Here she largely conforms to biopic convention – despite citing Darren Aronofsky's 2000 film *Requiem for a Dream* as a (not readily detectable) visual influence. *Little Girl Blue* sticks to a familiar formula of archive footage, photographs and documents, with reminiscences from Joplin's family, friends and fellow musicians. There's even a three-act structure: Janis growing up, Janis in a band, Janis goes solo.

It's in the first act that image becomes a keynote, as Berg sketches out an awkward childhood which became a miserable adolescence. Bullied by classmates growing up in Port Arthur, Texas, for being bookish and pro-civil rights, Joplin was drawn to the more liberal surroundings of college town Austin. But having escaped there from high school and made her first outings on to the folk scene, she was voted 'Ugliest Man on Campus' by her fellow students in an orchestrated stunt that deeply wounded her. The effects seem to play out in a slow ripple through her later, troubled relationships (one boyfriend turned up at her parents' house, proposed and never came back) and her compulsive need for the validation of the crowd. Later on we see footage of 



Summertime: Janis Joplin

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Paula Weinstein
Joe Roth
Will Ward
Brian Grazer
Ron Howard
Screenplay
Charles Leavitt
Story
Charles Leavitt
Rick Jaffa
Amanda Silver
Based on the book *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick

Director of Photography

Anthony Dod Mantle
Edited by
Mike Hill
Dan Hanley
Production Designer
Mark Tildesley
Music
Rogue Baños
Production Sound Mixer
Chris Munro
Costume Designer
Julian Day
Visual Effects by
Double Negative

Scanline VFX
Rodeo FX
Luma Pictures
Stunt Co-ordinators
Eunice Huthart
Daniel F. Malone

©Cott Productions LLC and Enelmar Productions, A.I.E.
Production Companies
Warner Bros.
Pictures presents in association with Village Roadshow Pictures, RatPac-

Dune Entertainment a Cott Productions - Enelmar Productions, A.I.E. co-production A Roth Films, Spring Creek, Imagine Entertainment production in association with Kia Jam A Ron Howard film
Executive Producers
Bruce Berman
Steven Mnuchin
Sarah Bradshaw
Palak Patel
Erica Huggins

David Bergstein

Cast

Chris Hemsworth
Owen Chase
Benjamin Walker
George Pollard
Cillian Murphy
Matthew Joy
Tom Holland
Thomas Nickerson
Ben Whishaw
Herman Melville
Brendan Gleeson
Tom Nickerson

Michelle Fairley
Mrs Nickerson

Dolby Digital/Dolby Atmos/Datasat In Colour
Colour and Prints by Technicolor
[1.85:1]

Some screenings presented in 3D

Distributor
Warner Bros. Pictures International (UK)

Nantucket, Massachusetts, 1850. The young novelist Herman Melville arrives at the home of old seaman Thomas Nickerson, a survivor of the wreck of the Essex, whose sinking is the stuff of legend. After some cajoling, Nickerson agrees to tell his tale.

Thirty years earlier. As the Essex prepares to set sail, first mate Owen Chase is disappointed to find himself serving under inexperienced captain George Pollard Jr, who has little to recommend him other than his famous name. After many months at sea and only one successful day of hunting, rumour reaches the men of whaling grounds far from land, supposedly

guarded by an enormous white whale. They set a course for the grounds, but the Essex is damaged by the white whale. Salvaging what they can from the wrecked ship, the survivors take to open water in three remaining whaleboats, surviving further attacks from the vengeful whale and turning to cannibalism to survive. After making peace with the whale in a last confrontation, the bedraggled survivors make land in Chile and from there return to Nantucket, where representatives of the whale-oil company urge them to say nothing about the 'sea monster' for fear of harming profits. Melville decides to write the truth.

★★★★★
 "Warm, witty and seductive:
 Moretti's best film since
The Son's Room"
 Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

★★★★★
 "Touching, nicely nuanced...
 brilliantly acted"
 Donald Clarke, The Irish Times


WINNER
 Ecumenical Jury Prize
 CANNES 2015

★★★★★
 Empire

Margherita BUY
 John TURTURRO
 Giulia LAZZARINI
 Nanni MORETTI

MIA MADRE

A FILM BY PALME D'OR WINNER NANNI MORETTI



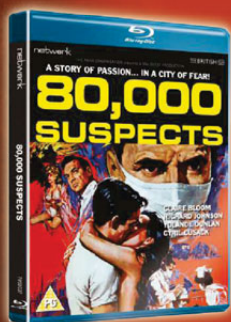
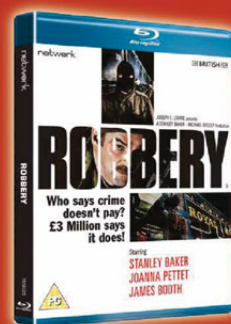
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➔ Joplin interviewed at the height of her fame, about to perform at her high-school reunion; success is meant to be the best revenge but Joplin's vulnerability and ambivalence at the prospect are painful to witness.

Other clips of Joplin and the media fascinate: her appearances on Dick Cavett's talk show have a casual honesty that feels almost prehistoric from the perspective of the present day, when media-trained celebrities guard their privacy and build their brands with practised ease. Previously unseen footage is one of *Little Girl Blue*'s strengths. Outtakes from a D.A. Pennebaker project show Joplin and the group she had her initial success with, Big Brother and the Holding Company, in a New York studio swapping passive-aggressive banter about different arrangements and takes of 'Summertime'. Elsewhere Berg picks live clips of Joplin with maximum impact: Pennebaker footage of her breakthrough performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop festival captures Mama Cass of The Mamas & The Papas in the audience – "Wow, heavy," she mouths to her bandmates. And on the train that carried Joplin and the rest of the Festival Express line-up from venue to venue in the summer of 1970 we see her hanging out with the Grateful Dead and casually running through Kris Kristofferson's 'Me and Bobby McGee' (her cover version of that song became a posthumous number-one single).

Berg uses letters Joplin wrote home to her family in Port Arthur as narratorial voiceover, a device that could have been a mawkish misstep. That it comes off is a credit to the narrator, Chan Marshall, aka singer-songwriter Cat Power (who had a fleeting acting credit in Wong Kar-Wai's *My Blueberry Nights*). Marshall's low-key readings don't attempt an impression, but the Southern catch in her voice and her personal history of addiction in the background add a subtle intergenerational echo. 📧

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Alex Gibney
Amy J. Berg

Katherine LeBlond
Jeff Jampol

Written by
Amy J. Berg

Cinematography
Francesco Carrozzini
Paula Huidobro
Jenna Rosher

Edited by
Billy McMillin
Garret Price
Joe Beshenkovsky

Music
Joel Shearer

Production

Sound Mixers

Andy Giner

Dave Groman

Dan Cook

Marshall Potter

Sherrie Austin

Alex Herrera

©Janis Productions
LLC & THIRTEEN
Productions LLC

Production
Companies

PBS and Content
Media Corporation
present a production
of Disarming Films,
Jigsaw Productions
and THIRTEEN

Production LLC's
American Masters
in association
with Sony Music
Entertainment and
Union Entertainment
Group

Executive
Producers

Michael Kantor

Susan Lacy

Noah C. Haeussner

Stacey Offman

Michael Raimondi

narrated by
Chan Marshall
[i.e. Cat Power]

In Colour
[1.78:1]

Distributor

Dogwoof

A documentary about the life and career of Janis Joplin, singer with Big Brother and the Holding Company and later solo artist. Friends, family, bandmates and contemporaries discuss Joplin's personality, music, troubled adolescence, struggles with fame and the drug addiction that led to her death by overdose in October 1970 at the age of 27.

Krampus

USA/New Zealand/Japan 2015

Director: Michael Dougherty

Certificate 15 97m 42s

Reviewed by Mar Diestro-Dópido

Krampus is Michael Dougherty's highly anticipated second feature following his acclaimed Halloween portmanteau *Trick 'r Treat* (2007), a debut that has already achieved a kind of cult status, and not just among horror fans. His new film is essentially a family comedy-horror, a cautionary tale of sorts, in which he pays overt and warm homage to classic 80s horror movies – think the anarchic mayhem of *Gremlins* crossed with *Critters* and a dollop of *Poltergeist*. The difference being that this is a seasonal tale, in which the vicious titular beast of alpine pagan folklore – the dark version of Santa – and his posse of savage elves will appear to sow mayhem if you dare to traduce the spirit of Christmas.

"I hate my family!" bemoans Max, the 12-year-old protagonist, a boy who still just about believes in Santa Claus. Crammed in the house with his extended family just before Christmas, he reaches boiling point when his tomboy twin cousins mock his handwritten letter to Santa, in which he requests a return to the happier and more close-knit family they used to be. His tearing the letter to pieces is enough to summon Krampus, a hairy, hooved ghoul with horns, brought to life with some verve and stirring up excitement whenever he appears. Max's grandmother Omi (the mesmerising Austrian actress Krista Stadler), his only ally, explains that if you stop believing in Santa, his wicked sidekick is coming "not to reward but to punish, not to give but to take". Whereupon Krampus and his evil minions lay siege to Max's home and unceremoniously abduct members of his family on Christmas Eve, children first.

The riotous invasion of the family home by Krampus and his allies generates some laugh-out-loud, blackly comic moments, with a genuinely disturbing grotesque undertow. But where *Krampus* really succeeds is in its craftsmanship, particularly the set and monster



Wreck the halls: Emjay Anthony

design. Aside from an unexpected old-fashioned stop-motion animated interlude – a beautiful scene-stealer – Dougherty's monsters are brought to life using traditional animatronics elegantly paired up with digital technology. The mix of puppetry, costumes and just the right amount of CGI gives these critters – a clown with razors for teeth, a vicious angel, a whole troupe of heinous elves – a tongue-in-cheek yet refreshingly substantial corporeal presence.

But the real treat is *Krampus* itself. Honouring *Krampus*'s mythological status as the 'shadow' of Saint Nicholas, Dougherty keeps him a caped mystery throughout the film, never more than partly revealing him until late on, and the tactic pays off. When Krampus is finally exposed to the camera, his gorgeously creepy wooden mask, frozen into a frightened expression mirroring Max's own, recalls Omi's words that, like Saint Nicholas, Christmas "is what you make of it". 📧

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Thomas Tull
Jon Jashni

Michael Dougherty

Alex Garcia

Written by

Todd Casey

Michael Dougherty

Zach Shields

Director of

Photography

Jules O'Loughlin

Film Editor

John Axelrad

Production Designer

Jules Cook

Music

Douglas Pipe

Sound Supervisor

Kelly Oxford

Costume Designer

Bob Buck

©Legendary and

Universal Studios

Production

Companies

Legendary Pictures

and Universal

Pictures present a

Legendary Pictures/
Zam Pictures

production

A film by Michael
Dougherty

The filmmakers

acknowledge

the assistance of

the New Zealand

government's Screen

Production Grant

Presented in

association with

Dentsu Inc./

Fuji Television

Network, Inc.

Executive Producers

Daniel M. Stillman

Zach Shields

Film Extracts

Psycho (1960)

Cast

Adam Scott

Tom Engel

Toni Collette

Sarah Engel

David Koechner

Howard Burkhauser

Allison Tolman

Linda Burkhauser

Conchata Ferrell

Aunt Dorothy

Emjay Anthony

Max Engel

Stefania LaVie Owen

Beth Engel

Krista Stadler

Omi

Dolby Digital/

Datasat/SDDS

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Universal Pictures

International

UK & Eire

US, the present. Twelve-year-old Max is about to celebrate Christmas with his parents, Tom and Sarah, his teenage sister Beth and his Austrian grandmother Omi. Sarah's sister Linda and her family join them for three days. Max dislikes his gun- and booze-crazy uncle Howard, and becomes upset when his tomboy twin cousins mock his letter to Santa at the dinner table, so much so he rips it up and throws it away. A complete blackout suddenly occurs and the next day there is a snow blizzard. The family finds itself under siege from a hooved monster, which is accompanied by an army of vicious elves, snowmen, toys and angels; one by one, each member of the family is attacked and then abducted by what Omi explains is Krampus, a monster representing the dark side of Saint Nicholas. Krampus has appeared because when Max threw away his letter to Santa he appeared to be renouncing the Christmas spirit. It transpires that when Omi was a young girl after the war, all the adults lost the spirit of generosity and compassion and were taken away by Krampus; only she was left as a reminder. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to kill the evil creatures with guns, Max realises the importance of family, selflessness and forgiveness; family life is restored to how it was before Krampus's arrival. Max hugs his parents; when he opens his present – a jingle-bell ball in the form of Krampus – everyone remembers the earlier events.

The Last Diamond

France/Belgium/Luxembourg 2014
Director: Eric Barbier

Reviewed by Ginette Vincendeau

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist

The Last Diamond follows the well-trodden path of the heist movie, a genre with a long and glorious pedigree, from John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) to the *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Twelve* (2004) and *Thirteen* (2007) series, via notable French exponent Jean-Pierre Melville and such classics as *Le Cercle rouge* (1970). Accordingly, the first part of the film is spent in the assembling of a team and the meticulous preparation of a spectacular robbery, which takes place, successfully, in the middle of the film; the last part deals with the traditional aftermath of double-dealings, bloody shootouts and returns to jail. Eric Barbier's film sets its story in the diamond milieu, prompting trips between Paris and Antwerp and, no doubt because of the French-Belgian-Luxembourger co-production credits, to Luxembourg as well.

On leaving jail, Simon (Yvan Attal) is reluctantly persuaded by his friend Albert (Jean-François Stévenin) to do one 'last' job – another familiar generic trope. This involves offering his talent for breaking 'unbreakable' safes and security systems to brutal Belgian hoodlum Scylla (Antoine Basler), in the process lying to his parole officer. He infiltrates the glamorous, shady world of the diamond dealers, paying particular attention to the person of Julia (Bérénice Bejo), who is in charge of the auction following the suspicious death of her mother. Julia is herself surrounded by an array of seedy characters, including her own father (Jacques Spiesser). The result is predictable: romance between Simon and Julia, a few nail-biting moments of near-exposure, and the expected play on false appearances and double-crosses within the gang. Less predictable is the 'happy end', in which the true villains are killed or severely punished while semi-reformed Simon gets off lightly and is reunited with Julia. So this is one story in which crime pays, as long as you let go of the enormous diamond that, in any case, as the film



School of hard rocks: Bérénice Bejo, Yvan Attal

demonstrates, can be beautifully imitated.

Despite this proven winning formula, and a solid if not stellar cast, *The Last Diamond* disappoints. At issue partly is a wavering in tone between action, romance and comedy, where the mixture doesn't always gel. For instance, the opening joke, in which Simon appears naked in front of housemaids at a Sofitel hotel to gain access to a bedroom, is quite funny, even with the none-too-subtle allusion to the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair of 2011. It is less so when reprised at the end, with Julia as the surprise (or should I say the 'prize') in the bedroom. And for an audience brought up on hi-tech *Ocean's*-style action thrillers, the production values are underwhelming; particularly egregious in this respect are the wig and thick glasses donned by Julia towards the end, a disguise that seems hardly likely to have fooled supposedly mastermind villains. In the end, though, it is the lack of tension that undoes the film. With neither spectacular blockbuster values nor the mythic resonance of Melville's minimalist yet suspenseful gangster epics, *The Last Diamond* is a well-made and watchable smash-and-grab – but the jackpot eludes it. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Farid Lahouassa
Aïssa Djabri
Screenplay, Adaptation and Dialogue
Eric Barbier
Tran-Minh Nam
Marie Eynard
Screenplay Collaboration
Denys Corel
Antoine de Froberville
Blandine Stintzy
Original Idea
Eric Barbier
Tran-Minh Nam
Director of Photography
Denis Rouden
Editor
Jennifer Augé
Art Director
Pierre Renson
Original Music
Renaud Barbier
Sound
Philippe Kohn
Nicolas Tran Trong
Michel Schillings
Costume Designer
Uli Simon

©Vertigo Productions, Scope Pictures, Bidibul Productions, CN3 Productions
Production Companies
Aïssa Djabri & Farid Lahouassa present a Vertigo Productions, Scope Pictures, Bidibul Productions, CN3 Productions co-production
In association with Indéfim 2, B Media Export – Backup Media
With the participation of Canal+, Ciné+, Film Fund Luxembourg, Tax Shelter du Gouvernement Fédéral Belge and Belgacom

Cast
Yvan Attal
Simon
Bérénice Bejo
Julia
Jean-François

Stévenin
Albert
Antoine Basler
Scylla
Jacques Spiesser
Pierre Neuville
Annie Cordy
Inès de Boissière
Charlie Dupont
Michael Wurst
Michel Israel
Jacques Galley
Danièle Denie
Blanche de Courcy
Gene Bervoets
Philippe de Mazières
Daniel Hanssens
Mathieu Delcourt

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
Swipe Films

French theatrical title
Le Dernier Diamant

France, the present. On leaving jail, renowned safecracker Simon is persuaded by his friend Albert to carry out one last heist – the theft of an enormous diamond called 'the Florentine', soon to be auctioned in Antwerp. When diamond expert Marie is found dead in her car, her daughter Julia takes over the auction, despite her father's warning that the diamond is 'jinxed'. Reluctantly, Simon teams up with Belgian hard man Scylla and his gang, who carefully plan the robbery. To gain access to the security equipment, Simon convinces Julia that he is a former adviser of her mother's; in the process the two fall in love. Despite encountering some problems (including the unplanned killing of an elderly woman), the heist is a success, and Simon, Scylla and his gang make their escape. On board ship out of Antwerp, Scylla and his sidekick gun down the others, though the wounded Simon escapes. He and Albert realise that Scylla is a friend of Philippe de Mazières, a member of Julia's entourage who, it turns out, killed her mother. Simon and Albert convince Julia to join them in Luxembourg, where Scylla is preparing to sell the diamond to a Russian billionaire, planning to replace the stone with a fake. Things go wrong and in the bloody shootout that ensues, Julia's father dies; Scylla, de Mazières and Simon are arrested. Thanks to Julia's testimony, Simon gets only a two-year sentence; when he comes out, she is waiting for him.

Lee Scratch Perry's Vision of Paradise

Germany 2015, Director: Volker Schaner

Reviewed by Frances Morgan

When German filmmaker Volker Schaner started documenting Lee 'Scratch' Perry's studio, he couldn't have known just what a valuable visual record he was creating. As I started to write this review, news emerged of an accident at the 79-year-old reggae producer's so-called Secret Laboratory. Perry had, he wrote in a Facebook post, forgotten to put out a candle, and everything had gone up in flames: "My whole life collections, arts, my magic hats, my magic boots, all my crazy show outfits... my electronics and studio equipment and my magic mic, books, music, CDs..."

The incident seems all the more tragic after watching Schaner's sprawling film, which Perry co-produced. The studio spaces that Perry has created, both the Black Ark in Kingston, Jamaica – which also burned down, in 1978 – and the Secret Laboratory, in the Swiss mountain town Perry moved to in 1990, are iconic in every sense of the word. They are not only spaces in which art is created but significant works of outsider art in themselves, their every collage or assemblage or significantly placed object a key part of Perry's aesthetic and cosmology. While Perry is known as the progenitor of dub, "a music that isn't so much created by playing music but created by subtraction and extraction", as interviewee Mad Professor puts it, his visual art is all about addition and lamination, things glued together and piled on top of one another with an animistic intent. Like dubs, though, his artworks are intrinsically malleable and unfinished in some way: new gems can always be pasted on to the magic boots, or new photos ripped up and laid over an existing collage.

Schaner has been working with Perry since 1999, when he claims to have "found the Jamaican legend living in the mountains of Switzerland". Of course this is dramatising: Perry is no Sixto Rodriguez (who turns out, in *Searching for Sugarman*, not to have been such a recluse either) but highly visible, now somewhere between a deejay and a spoken-word artist, who performs regularly all over Europe. Collaborators including The Orb and producer Adrian Sherwood are filmed either performing or recording with Perry; others give enthusiastic testimonies. *Vision of Paradise* is the second film about the musician to have been released in the past five years; 2011's much slicker historical portrait *The Upsetter*, narrated by Benicio Del Toro, showed Perry as an innovator whose influence transcended reggae, bringing in famous fans like Paul McCartney. This and the 2012 documentary *Marley* make it clear that reggae is a story only when it crosses over to mainstream rock and pop audiences, while films such as *I Am the Gorgon*, a 2013 documentary about producer Bunny 'Striker' Lee, are released on small reggae labels and rarely reach festival and cinema audiences. *Vision of Paradise* is more of a grassroots project than *The Upsetter* but it still depends on numerous white interlocutors as its talking heads.

The long timeframe of the shooting makes for a candid, relaxed atmosphere that it's hard not to warm to. It also makes the narrative difficult to follow at times, even though it's divided into chapters (including one diversion

in which Schaner, without Perry, visits Ethiopia to find out more about the roots of Rastafarianism). But this is not supposed to be a rigorous examination of Perry's life or indeed his work. Commentators such as the African-American author Michael Veal, who could have outlined the technological and sociopolitical context of dub, are absent; instead the mood is metaphysical. Perry leads Schaner and the audience down the associative garden paths that he sees in everything, his conversation much like his song lyrics, a constant pattern of cosmic puns and regal proclamations. We see him playing up to interviewers, chuckling at their polite responses to his majestic claims. There is a low-level soundtrack that includes many favourites, but the music is not spoken about in depth. And there is a reticence about revisiting the Black Ark era – unsurprisingly, considering its troubled final chapter.

A visit to Jamaica, with a voiceover by Jamaican actor Sheldon Shepherd, vibrates with a weird melancholy, as Perry visits his mother, now in her nineties, and what remains of his old studio; he also attends a Nyabingi ritual, which is filmed with a haunting intimacy. Schaner's close relationship with Perry is at its most evident in this trip to Perry's homeland, and in a scene where Perry explores a 'skull cave' on an idyllic beach and muses on human and divine creativity. "So if you make art, you're serving God?" asks Schaner. "Definitely. God is how great thou art," Perry replies. ☺



Dub master: Lee 'Scratch' Perry

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Volker Schaner
Written by
Volker Schaner
Director of Photography
Volker Schaner
Editor
Volker Schaner
Sound Recording
Christoph Riethmaier

©Fufoo Film GmbH
Production Companies
Fufoo Film and Schmid Kodex presents a movie

by Volker Schaner
ZDF in collaboration with Arte
Executive Producer
Daniela Schmid

narrated by
Volker Schaner
narrator Jamaica
Sheldon Shepherd
narrator Ethiopia
Martha Fessehatzion

Voice Cast
Yoko von Roy
Black Madonna voice
Maria Sargarodski

Jomo Charles Daniela Schmid
Volker Schaner
demon voices
Nicole Olmsted
Vincent Toitot
telephone voices

In Colour
[1.78:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
MusicFilmNetwork

A German-made documentary about reggae producer Lee Scratch Perry, who relocated from Jamaica to Switzerland in 1990. Filming over a period of 15 years, director Volker Schaner documents Perry in his Swiss studio, travelling to Berlin and London, performing in Switzerland and Germany and finally visiting Jamaica. Interviewees include Perry's biographer David Katz and fellow musicians and producers Dennis Bovell, Adrian Sherwood, Irmin Schmidt and The Orb. The film also includes animations by Maria Sargarodski.

Lost in Karastan

United Kingdom/Germany/Russia/Georgia 2014
Director: Ben Hopkins
Certificate 15 95m 50s

Reviewed by Catherine Wheatley

The damp odour of mediocrity permeates *Lost in Karastan*, a film about a film that might be great but in all probability won't be. It certainly offers persuasive evidence of its central character's theory that western cinema has lost its way, which is particularly strange given that it is co-written by Pawel Pawlikowski, the director of some of the most exciting, intriguing cinema to come out of Europe in recent years, including 2013's quietly splendid *Ida*.

Lost in Karastan is the first film since 2008 from director Ben Hopkins, whose early features (*The Nine Lives of Tomas Katz*, *37 Uses for a Dead Sheep*) were much garlanded, and tells the story of a much garlanded young director whose career has slid to a halt. It's unclear to what extent it's drawn from real life; Hopkins surely can't be unaware of the parallels, though.

The maker of films with such nonsensical titles as *Edge of Infinity* and *The 79th Parallel*, Emil Forester (a typically dour Matthew Macfadyen) once won an Oscar – if only, as one running gag has it, for a short film. Now he is behind on his cleaning bills and listening to self-help podcasts in search of inspiration for his next project. So an invitation to present a retrospective of his work in the fictional Eastern European country of Karastan is both a bolster to his ego and a kick in the teeth, especially once he learns that he will be sharing the platform with drug-addled bad-boy actor Xan Butler, played by Noah Taylor as a cross between Russells Crowe and Brandt. To add insult to injury, it emerges that megalomaniac President Abashiliev is far less interested in Forester's oeuvre than in his soon-to-be-ex-wife Caitlin, the airbrushed face of a vodka that shares its name with the country's epic hero, Tanat.



Eastern blocked: Matthew Macfadyen

When Forester accepts Abashiliev's commission to film Tanat's legend, *Lost in Karastan* crunches from wincingly dry satire on the independent film scene to confused and confusing political commentary, a move foreshadowed when femme fatale Chulpan (MyAnna Buring) describes Karastan as a land of "poetry and competitive labour costs". Indeed, the filmmakers semaphore throughout what they see as the uncomfortable marriage of artistic, political and economic priorities. But this is a theme that has been developed with more melancholy, wit or bite in other, more coherent films: *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Wag the Dog* (1997), for example. Even *Borat* (2006) and *The Interview* (2014), flawed as they were, set about their targets with gusto. *Lost in Karastan* raises a smile but not a guffaw; unease but not shock; a faint chill rather than dread. Shot in Georgia by Jörg Gruber, it conjures the stark, eerie beauty of the former Eastern Bloc with confidence, but its impressive images are never breathtaking. Like its hero, it is haunted by the ghosts of better films. ☹

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Mike Downey
Producer
Vladimir Katcharava

Produced by
Sam Taylor
Written by
Pawel Pawlikowski
Ben Hopkins
Director of Photography
Jörg Gruber
Editor
Alan Levy
Production Design
Mamuka Esadze
Kote Japaridze
Music
Andreas Lucas
Sound

Simon Bysshe
Nika Paniashvili
Costume Designer
Keti Kalandadze

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Production Companies
Stealth Media Group presents a Film & Music Entertainment production in co-production with Brandstorm Entertainment, 20 Steps, Metra Films and ZDF, Cine Plus Filmproduktion

with the support of Hessen Invest Film, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Georgian National Film Centre, Piffi Medien A Downey-Taylor production in co-production with ZDF with the support of Deutscher Filmförderfond FFA in co-production with Cine Plus Filmproduktion Production companies: Epic Films Ltd, 20 Steps

Productions Co-production companies: Metrafilms Ltd, Brandstorm Entertainment AG Funding and services: Hessen Invest Film, British Film Institute, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Wirtschafts- und Infrastrukturbank Hessen, Georgian Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection, Georgian National Film Center, Cine Plus Media Group

Developed with the support of the BFI Film Fund
Executive Producers
Glenn Ackermann
Michael Cowan
Pawel Pawlikowski

Cast
Matthew Macfadyen
Emil Forester
Noah Taylor
Xan Butler
MyAnna Buring
Chulpan
Richard Van Weyden
President Abashiliev
Lasha Ramishvili
Ruslan

David Veljanashvili
Shadow
Ümit Ünal
Saro
Leo Antadze
Igor
Maria Fernandez-Ache
Maria
Sofi Sebiskveradze
Kaitlin

Black & White and Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Bulldog Film Distributors

London, the present. Washed-up director Emil Forester receives an invitation to introduce a retrospective of his work at an international film festival in the Eastern European state of Karastan.

After being welcomed by the beautiful Chulpan, Emil is crestfallen to discover that he is sharing top billing with Hollywood bad-boy actor Xan Butler, and further disgruntled to discover the face of his soon-to-be-ex-wife Kaitlin, a celebrated actress, displayed all over the city's advertising billboards. Forester is summoned for a meeting with President Abashiliev, who explains that he wants him to direct a film about Karastan's national hero, Tanat. Emil accepts, but at the subsequent press conference is shocked by the announcement that Xan will play the film's lead.

Minister of culture Saro tells Emil that the film will never get made; despite this warning, filming begins energetically. Soon, however, rebel militia threaten production; midway through the shoot, Xan disappears, presumably kidnapped. Chulpan, acting on Abashiliev's orders, seduces Forester, telling him that she would do anything for her country. The shoot collapses. Abashiliev is deposed in a coup and Saro assumes leadership of the country. Chulpan drives Forester to safety, revealing that she is working for the rebel party.

One year later, Forester is working in a hardware store when Abashiliev turns up. He explains that he rescued the film rushes and fled to the Isle of Man. He asks Forester to resume filming, with Kaitlin playing the part of Tanat's wife.

The Night Before

USA 2015
Director: Jonathan Levine
Certificate 15 101m 6s

Reviewed by Adam Nayman

How time flies. It hardly seems like a year has gone by since Seth Rogen was at the centre of an international incident. Recall that many a pop-culture rubbernecker spent Christmas Day 2014 streaming *The Interview* on their home entertainment systems after the film's distributor decided it was too dangerous to put into theatres.

There will be no such problems for the star's new vehicle *The Night Before*, which doesn't have any scenes featuring North Korean dictators (although *The Interview*'s Kim Jong-un, Randall Park, does have a winking cameo). Rather, it's the sort of amiably vulgar comedy that couldn't possibly upset anybody in the post-Apatow era. For all the carnage, cocaine and digital snapshots of flaccid members – it may hold the record for most dick pics in a mainstream motion picture – this is an utterly inoffensive production. It's aiming for a place as a beloved modern holiday perennial à la *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Home Alone* – both of which get affectionately parodied along the way.

Clad in a garish wool sweater adorned with a Star of David – an endearingly tacky emblem of Jewishness in a Christmas movie – Rogen flails his way through *The Night Before* with slapstick purpose. His character, Isaac, is about to become a father, and his wife Betsy (Jillian Bell) has thoughtfully gifted him with a small box of hard drugs as a thank-you for his steadfast emotional support over the course of her pregnancy (“I went on Craigslist,” she explains sweetly). The idea is that Isaac will share his collection of pills and powders with his childhood pals Chris (Anthony Mackie) and Ethan (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) as a way of sending their annual holiday outing into the stratosphere. The resulting extra-high spirits clash with the melancholy knowledge that this is supposed to be the last such adolescent bash in their increasingly complicated lives.

The idea of three almost-grown-ups regressing to teen glory and self-medicating as a way of



Boyhood: Rogen, Mackie, Gordon-Levitt

staving off adulthood is not without some spiky satirical potential, but director Jonathan Levine, who previously worked with Rogen and Gordon-Levitt on *50/50* (2011), piles on gloppy sentiment instead. Everybody on screen is secretly a sweetheart, which blunts the edge of the material. It's frankly exhausting waiting for these rumpled man-children to realise how much they love and need each other in the end, and the adventures they get up to in between aren't outrageous or insane enough to offset the mechanical clanking of the storytelling.

Predictability aside, the most wearying thing about *The Night Before* is probably its parade of celebrity walk-ons – including an inevitable appearance by Rogen's comedy life-partner. That said, it's hard not to smile at Michael Shannon in an extended cameo as a cosmically wise pot dealer. Our patron saint of movie psychos seems to be enjoying himself and, in the middle of so much perfunctory debauchery, the little twinkles of inspiration in his line readings prove surprisingly persuasive. He's having fun, and as long as he's on screen, it's contagious. ➡

Rams

Iceland/Denmark/Norway/Poland 2015
Director: Grímur Hákonarson

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

In one widescreen frame in *Rams*, we see two sheep farms stretching side by side across a gently sloping valley, the properties divided in the middle by a road heading straight towards the camera position. The poised symmetry of the composition is almost too good to be true, but this is rural Iceland, where sheep farming is a traditional component of the local economy, so there's every reason to believe it's a real location. That tension between authenticity and contrivance is absolutely at the heart of Grímur Hákonarson's second narrative feature, which takes the evident dramatic construct of two brothers who are neighbours, rival sheep breeders and – most significantly – haven't spoken to each other in 40 years (for reasons the film takes its time revealing) and sets it against the plight of a very real farming community whose pride in its sheep stock proves no protection against today's tough market realities.

The antics of the warring siblings play out as a sort of bitter comedy, especially when one very clever collie is pressed into service to carry letters between the two when they have no choice but to communicate with one another. However, the crisis that brings this to pass is only too serious: the presence of scrapie in the ram that has just won best-in-show for Theodór Júlíusson's Kiddi (the embittered, hard-drinking, slightly unhinged brother), prompting Sigurdur Sigurjónsson's seemingly more responsible Gummi to sound the alarm and bring in ministry vets to slaughter all the sheep in the area. Suddenly, the fraternal friction is set in a wider context in which livelihoods and maybe even lives are at risk, and Hákonarson's Un Certain Regard prizewinner sustains the tension supplied by those escalating stakes while never sacrificing the story's in-built wit and quirkiness.

Events move with such a smoothly inevitable logic that the film's trajectory appears almost effortless, making it easy to miss the skilled craft shaping the director's screenplay. Of course, there's something endearing about the woolly capriciousness of the sheep themselves, somehow loveably benign yet exasperatingly stubborn, and fortunately that engaging charm extends to the two central characters, with Kiddi's utterly unrepentant orneriness only bringing out Gummi's clear-headed decency – and the latter's anti-establishment streak makes him even more of an audience

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Evan Goldberg
Seth Rogen
James Weaver

Screenplay

Jonathan Levine
Kyle Hunter
Ariel Shaffir
Evan Goldberg

Story

Jonathan Levine

Director of

Photography

Brandon Trost

Edited by

Zene Baker

Production Designer

Annie Spitz

Music

Marco Beltrami

Miles Hankins

Production

Sound Mixer

Christof Gebert

Costume Designer

Melissa Toth

©Columbia Pictures

Industries, Inc.

Production

Companies

Columbia Pictures

presents in

association with

Good Universe and

I-Star Capital a Point

Grey production

A Jonathan

Levine film

Executive Producers

Nathan Kahane

Joe Drake

Kyle Hunter

Ariel Shaffir

Barbara A. Hall

Ben Waisbren

Cast

Joseph

Gordon-Levitt

Ethan

Seth Rogen

Isaac

Anthony Mackie

Chris

Lizzy Caplan

Diana

Jillian Bell

Betsy

Mindy Kaling

Sarah

Michael Shannon

Mr Green

Lorraine Toussaint

Mrs Roberts

Randall Park

boss

Ilana Glazer

Rebecca Grinch

Nathan Fielder

Joshua

Tracy Morgan

narrator/Santa

James Franco

Miley Cyrus

Baron Davis

themselves

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Sony Pictures

Releasing (UK)

New York, the present. Ethan was orphaned as a teenager and has celebrated Christmas with best friends Isaac and Chris ever since. Ethan steals three tickets to the exclusive Nutcracker Ball, knowing that this will be their last Christmas together: Isaac and his wife Betsy are expecting a baby, and Chris has become a big football star. Betsy gives Isaac a little box of hard drugs to make their night even more exciting. Chris wants to buy weed to take to the Nutcracker Ball to give to the star quarterback of his team, so the friends seek out their old dealer Mr Green. They go from place to place, including a karaoke bar where Ethan runs into ex-girlfriend Diana, who is also going to the Nutcracker Ball. Isaac realises that he has left his phone with a friend and that it contains an incriminating video message, recorded while high, about his worries about parenthood. He splits from the group to retrieve the phone, while Chris chases a girl who has stolen his bag of weed. Ethan is beaten up by a pair of drunks dressed as Santa. At the Nutcracker Ball, Ethan meets Miley Cyrus, who persuades him to propose to Diana on stage, which ends badly. Ethan finds Mr Green on the roof and recalls Chris and Isaac comforting him after his parents' death. All the friends are reconciled. We see that Mr Green is an angel. He leaves to visit Santa Claus in the North Pole.



Sigurdur Sigurjónsson, Theodór Júlíusson

↩ favourite. To find another film whose straightforward, almost homespun simplicity masks a director in truly confident control of his material you'd probably have to go back to David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999). While the subject matter is very different here, Hákonarson's achievement, like Lynch's before him, is ultimately to leave us with a sense that universal themes are thrumming through an extremely localised and specific scenario. In the case of *Rams*, you won't spot it coming, but fate, circumstances and brilliant filmmaking deliver a final image that not only sets individual conflict within the broader realm of human brotherhood but somehow also prompts a surge of emotion from an outcome on the very tipping-point of exquisite uncertainty. A minor classic, no less. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Producer Grímar Jónsson	Icelandic Film Centre, Danish Film Institute, Icelandic Ministry of Industries and Innovation	Gunnar Jónsson Grímur Sveinn Ólafur Gunnarsson Bjarni
Writer Grímur Hákonarson	In association with Film Farms, Aeroplan Film	In Colour [2.35:1]
Director of Photography Sturla Brandth Grøvlen	A film by Grímur Hákonarson	Subtitles
Editor Kristján Lodmíkjör	Produced by Netop Films	Distributor Soda Pictures
Production Designer Bjarni Massi	Co-produced by Profile Pictures	Icelandic theatrical title Hrútar
Music Atli Örvarsson	Executive Producers Thor Sigurjónsson Alan R. Milligan Tom Kjeseth Eliza Oczkowska Klaudia Smieja	
Sound Design Huldar Freyr Arnarson Björn Viktorsson		
Costume Design Margrét Einarssdóttir Ólöf Benediktssóttir		
Cast		
©Netop Films, Mark Kvikmyndagero, Profile Pictures		
Production Companies Netop Films presents in co-production with Profile Pictures Supported by	Screenplay Mark L. Smith Alejandro G. Iñárritu	Costume Designer Jacqueline West
	Visual Effects by Industrial Light & Magic MPC Cinesite Technicolor VFX Secret Lab Green Light SoHo	Production Companies A Regency Enterprises
	Director of Photography Emmanuel Lubezki	Executive Producers Brett Ratner James Packer Jennifer Davison David Kanter Markus Barmettler
	Edited by Stephen Mirrione	Production Companies A Regency Enterprises
	Production Designer	Cast Leonardo DiCaprio Hugh Glass Tom Hardy John Fitzgerald Domhnall Gleeson Captain Andrew Henry Will Poulter Bridger Forrester Goodluck Hawk Duane Howard Elk Dog Arthur Redcloud Hikuk
	Screenplay Mark L. Smith Alejandro G. Iñárritu	Executive Producers Brett Ratner James Packer Jennifer Davison David Kanter Markus Barmettler
	Visual Effects by Industrial Light & Magic MPC Cinesite Technicolor VFX Secret Lab Green Light SoHo	Production Companies A Regency Enterprises
	Director of Photography Emmanuel Lubezki	Executive Producers Brett Ratner James Packer Jennifer Davison David Kanter Markus Barmettler
	Edited by Stephen Mirrione	Production Companies A Regency Enterprises
	Production Designer	Cast Leonardo DiCaprio Hugh Glass Tom Hardy John Fitzgerald Domhnall Gleeson Captain Andrew Henry Will Poulter Bridger Forrester Goodluck Hawk Duane Howard Elk Dog Arthur Redcloud Hikuk

A remote sheep-farming valley in Iceland, present day. At the local farming association's annual awards, elderly landowner Gummi is delighted to win silver in the best ram competition, but his joy is short-lived when the top prize goes to Kiddi, his neighbour and rival – and the brother he hasn't spoken to in 40 years. On his way home, Gummi checks Kiddi's winning animal and detects early signs of the contagious disease scrapie. The agricultural ministry is forced to slaughter all the sheep in the area – a disaster for the local farming community, which is already under economic pressure. Gummi kills his sheep before the authorities arrive, and cooperates in the sterilisation process, but an angry Kiddi fires shots through Gummi's window and refuses to take part. However, Gummi has secretly kept his best ram and a handful of ewes to continue propagating the flock, and Kiddi's discovery of this subterfuge sees him falling into line with the authorities. Bereft at the loss of his animals, Kiddi takes to the bottle, and Gummi takes him to hospital after he almost freezes to death. Kiddi returns just in time to stop the police uncovering Gummi's hidden stock of sheep; in order to preserve the flock, the two siblings drive the remaining sheep up into the mountain. A heavy snowstorm rolls in and Kiddi digs a survival tunnel. Years of conflict over a disputed inheritance are forgotten as they cling together for warmth, their future uncertain.

The Revenant

USA/Hong Kong/Taiwan 2015
Director: Alejandro G. Iñárritu



Thrall of the wild: Leonardo DiCaprio

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

The story of Hugh Glass, the tough-as-buckskin American frontiersman who in 1823 dragged his brutalised body over miles of rough terrain after being mauled by a grizzly and left for dead, was the stuff of legend almost as soon as it began to be passed around the young republic. In spite of this fact, save for a loose retelling by *Vanishing Point* director Richard C. Sarafian with Richard Harris, 1971's *Man in the Wilderness*, Glass's story has never been immortalised on screen in the fashion of, say, the defence of the Alamo, the shooting of Jesse James or the gunfight at the OK Corral. There is one rather simple reason for this: there ain't a hell of a lot of story there.

This is no obstacle for Alejandro G. Iñárritu,

who has shot a version of Glass's tale adapted from a 2002 novel by Michael Punke, an expert in international trade law and policy. *The Revenant* begins with a scene from a very different period in US trade history: fur trappers load the fruits of their summer's labour on to a flatboat, preparing to shove off down the Missouri River, when suddenly a hail of arrows explodes from the forest, followed by a Pawnee war party. Iñárritu, collaborating with the nonpareil cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki for the second time after last year's *Birdman*, opens fire in tandem, rolling out the film's first breathless set piece: a violent skirmish staged as an unbroken tracking shot in which the camera latches on to and is passed between combatants on both

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Arnon Milchan Steve Golin Alejandro G. Iñárritu Mary Parent Keith Redmon James W. Skotchdopole	Original Music Ryuichi Sakamoto Alva Noto	Vitality Visual Effects One of Us Image Engine	presentation in association with RatPac Entertainment A New Regency, Anonymous Content, M Productions, Appian Way production An Alejandro G. Iñárritu film	Philip Lee Jake Myers	Melaw Nakeh'o Powaga Grace Dove wife of Hugh Glass
Supervising Sound Editing and Design Martin Hernandez Randy Thom Lon Bender	Costume Designer Jacqueline West	Stunt Co-ordinators Doug Coleman Scott Ateah Brian Machleit Mark Vanselow	Executive Producers Brett Ratner James Packer Jennifer Davison David Kanter Markus Barmettler	Leonardo DiCaprio Hugh Glass	Lukas Haas Jones
Screenplay Mark L. Smith Alejandro G. Iñárritu	Visual Effects by Industrial Light & Magic MPC Cinesite Technicolor VFX Secret Lab Green Light SoHo	©Monarchy Enterprises S.A.R.L. and Revenant LLC (in all other territories)	Financed in association with Alpha Hong Kong and Catch Play	Domhnall Gleeson Captain Andrew Henry	Paul Anderson Anderson
Director of Photography Emmanuel Lubezki	Edited by Stephen Mirrione	Production Companies A Regency Enterprises	Executive Producers Brett Ratner James Packer Jennifer Davison David Kanter Markus Barmettler	Will Poulter Bridger	Kristoffer Joner Murphy
Production Designer				Forrest Goodluck Hawk	Dolby Digital/Dolby Atmos In Colour [2.35:1]
				Duane Howard Elk Dog	Distributor 20th Century Fox International (UK)
				Arthur Redcloud Hikuk	

The Upper Missouri River, 1823. While loading their stock on to a flatboat, a group of fur traders are ambushed and decimated by a Pawnee war party, the survivors barely escaping with their lives. The fur traders' scout, Hugh Glass, advises them to bury their loot and proceed overland, but while exploring the wilderness ahead he is wounded by a bear, seemingly mortally. The leader of the expedition leaves behind a small detachment of men, including Glass's half-Native American son, to watch over his final hours. However, one of them, John Fitzgerald, grows restless, murders Glass's boy and abandons Glass to the elements. Glass, bent on revenge, claws his way


out of his shallow grave and starts to drag himself towards the fort where Fitzgerald and the others were headed. He encounters a Native American who builds an impromptu sweat lodge to cure his putrefying wounds, and who is subsequently lynched by a band of French trappers. Glass ambushes the Frenchmen and steals a horse from them. Following another encounter with the Pawnee war party, he arrives at the fort to discover that Fitzgerald, hearing news of his survival, has left for Texas. Glass tracks Fitzgerald down and, after a bloody struggle, overpowers and kills him. The Native American war party bear silent witness to the fight and pass by Glass, leaving him unmolested.

sides, incidentally picking up bloody vignettes that include a trapper being garrotted with a bowstring and a shirtless drunk putting a bullet through the head of a tethered horse. Every report of musketry sounds off like a howitzer, and when a fleeing mountaineer is tackled and dragged down into the river by a brave, the camera will naturally follow underwater in due course.

The approach to the material taken by Inárritu and Lubezki – and in the case of *The Revenant* it seems very fitting to consider the two co-authors – is immersive and visceral. Wide-open spaces and stifling subjectivity combine in film-making that variously evokes Elem Klimov, Mikhail Kalatozov, or the mode of Philippe Grandrieux on a multiplex budget, offering an urgent life-or-death engagement with surroundings which substitutes for the relative paucity of narrative incident or character development. What story there is embellishes the known facts of the Glass case: mortally wounded by a mama grizzly bear, he is abandoned by the men assigned to minister to him in his final hours. One of these men, John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy, typically hammy, here sucking on a mouthful of settler beard), dispatches Glass's half-Native American son before taking his leave, providing Glass with a spur of revenge to keep him moving beyond the limits of exhaustion.

Starring as Glass, Leonardo DiCaprio is on screen for most of the film's running time, which is listed at 156 minutes but which I am fairly sure is closer to 17 hours. DiCaprio is one of our most viable classical-sense-of-the-world movie stars, though the particular nature of his gifts is better evidenced by his work in the 2013 one-two punch of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* than by anything in *The Revenant*, which indulges the actor's puerile equivalency of suffering with serious acting. (I recalled while watching that he petitioned James Cameron to play the hero of *Titanic* with a club foot.) Faces furrowed in pain tend to look similar, and nothing in the film exploits DiCaprio's individual skill set as a performer, leaving him to work through he-man hang-ups and literally chew on the scenery (twigs and berries, that is).

While Inárritu and Lubezki wow in scenes that anyone working with similar money and in similar circumstances could hardly fail to make impressive, the handling of Glass's family history is a haze of jerky-tough platitudes and cribbed Malick-isms, arbitrarily flitted through in order to give Glass a motive for vengeance and to establish that, through his relations with the Native Americans, he is somewhat less unprincipled trash than the other Europeans in the wilderness.

The plot might belong to an Anthony Mann-James Stewart western, but rather than the creeping queasiness that follows in a Mann film when a thirst for revenge is slaked, *The Revenant* closes on a heaving, sweaty flop, a physical collapse at the end of an endurance test. As Tarantino has done in his own very different snowbound Christmas western *The Hateful Eight*, Inárritu offers up a manifesto that presents a distinct vision of pure cinema and the potentialities of the medium. It is overwhelming but unmoving, a rush of brute force that leaves the nagging afterthought, "Is that all there is?" 

Rise of the Footsoldier Part II

United Kingdom 2015, Director: Ricci Harnett
Certificate 18 111m 6s

Reviewed by Kim Newman

Julian Gilbey's *Rise of the Foolsoldier* (2007), adapted from Carlton Leach's autobiography *Muscle* (2003), has proven a lasting success in the crowded field of football-hooligan-cum-gangster movies. An oddity about that film was that Leach, its central character, wasn't present at its climactic triple murder, though this tardy sequel – directed and scripted by star Ricci Harnett – insists on Leach remaining haunted by his best friend's death.

Here, Leach is called back from the airport when his estranged wife is terrified by a dodgy geezer lurking in the street outside her home; the loiterer isn't a hitman out to hurt Leach and his family but his decent, long-lost son. In what seems like a pattern, this reunion means that Leach isn't there when his new best friend Shawn, who specialises in heating up paperclips shoved under the fingernails of debtors, is stabbed in an attack intended for him.

The film alternates bursts of violence and excess (many shots of cocaine snorts, usually off pole-dancers' enhanced breasts) with occasional ruminative voiceover from a protagonist who'd like to contemplate rainbows (seriously, he actually does this) but is too far into crime to give up 'the life'. The finale promises – or threatens – a *Part III*. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Producer

Andrew Loveday
Written by
Ricci Harnett
Director of
Photography
Alfie Biddle
Editors
Paulo Pandolpho
William Gilbey
Gabriel Foster Prior
Production Design
Felix Coles
Music
Philip Curran
Production
Sound Mixer
Tom Harburt
Costume Design
Lenka Padyasakova

©Carnaby
International Sales
& Distribution Plc
**Production
Companies**
Carnaby
International
presents in
association
with Signature
Entertainment
**Executive
Producers**

Mike Loveday
Terry Loveday
Marc Goldberg
Carlton Leach
Film Extracts
*Rise of the
Footsoldier* (2006)

Cast

Ricci Harnett
Carlton Leach
Luke Mably
Shawn
Coralie Rose
Denny
Tygo Gernandt
Lars
Staine Kelly
Lucy
Georgia Bourke
Carly
Andy Linden
Reg
Johnny Palmiero
Mad Jack
Joshua Osei
Kev
Scott Peden
Fearless
Big Nastie
Bob
Nabil Elouahabi
Demirkan

Peter Benedict
Geoff King
Jasper Britton
Norton
Steven Berkoff
Dr Flint
Tommy Nash
Matt

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Signature
Entertainment

UK, 1995. After the death of his friend Tony Tucker, former football hooligan Carlton Leach spirals into addiction and depression, losing his position as a nightclub bouncer/underworld fixer and becoming estranged from his wife Denny and two daughters.

Some time later, a newly sober Carlton forms a small gang with his friend Shawn, a debt collector, and a few other associates. He becomes more aware of his responsibilities when his long-estranged adult son Matt reconnects with him, and when Shawn is stabbed while on a job in Portugal. Having offended the Nolan crime family, Carlton has to join a larger criminal enterprise to protect his family and get a contract on his life lifted.

Room

Ireland/Canada/United Kingdom/USA 2015

Director: Lenny Abrahamson

Certificate 15 117m 39s

Reviewed by Graham Fuller

Like Markus Schleiner's *Michael* (2011) and Ulrich Seidl's documentary *In the Basement* (2014), *Room* arrives in the wake of the horrific

domestic incarcerations of Natascha Kampusch and Elisabeth Fritzl in Schleinzner and Seidl's native Austria, and of Sabine Dardenne in Belgium, among other cases. Emma Donoghue's acclaimed source novel gave imaginative life to the relationship between Fritzl and her son Felix – youngest of the seven children she bore during her 24-year incarceration by her father – and transposed it to 24-year-old American captive Ma and her five-year-old son Jack.

Donoghue also drew on her relationship with her own five-year-old son and her notion of motherhood “as a crash course in existentialism”. Another influence was John Fowles’s *The Collector*. Unlike Fowles’s novel, however, neither Donoghue’s book nor her screenplay, directed by her fellow Dubliner Lenny Abrahamson, meditates philosophically on class inequities or the sociological ramifications of women and child kidnappings. Nor does *Room* dwell on the prolonged ordeal of Ma as the sex slave of her captor ‘Old Nick’, which Abrahamson handles discreetly, avoiding the magical realism that softened Lukas Moodysson’s otherwise harrowing *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002). The focus of *Room*’s first half is the circumscribed perspective of the child born and raised in captivity; its second half contrasts his assimilation into society with his mother’s fraught relaunch. Jack, miraculously untainted, emerges the stronger to become Ma’s spiritual protector.

His uncut hair makes him resemble a feminine wild child – the first stranger he encounters mistakes him for a girl – reinforcing his similarity to Alice, whose notions of what's big and small in Wonderland have been distorted by her removal from normal psychic reality. As the film's opening montage suggests, Jack, a Lewis Carroll reader whose imaginative powers have seemingly developed in response to his being deprived of external stimulants, magnifies every object in the claustrophobic shed he has never left. That he also personifies and names them in lieu of people – 'Door', 'Rug', 'Spider', an interloping 'Mouse' – testifies not only to his hardwired sociability but to Ma's meticulous nurturance, specifically in shielding him from her adult hell so that he can enjoy his childhood Eden.

Abrahamson's previous films include *Adam & Paul* (2004), *Garage* (2007) and *Frank* (2014), which all depict outsiders undergoing crises. Since Jack and Ma are outsiders by virtue of being *insiders*, in the literal sense of the word, *Room* succeeds or fails on the director's ability not only to spatialise their confinement dynamically but also to render Jack's primal experiences metaphorically. Abrahamson accomplishes this by having cinematographer Danny Cohen shoot Jack and Ma in tactile close-ups in the roft x roft 'Room', which is made to seem huge (mirroring Jack's sense of it) by the 2.35:1 ratio. The comfort Jack gets from confinement in close proximity to Ma intimates that he has travelled from one womb to another, which explains his anxiety



Within these walls: Brie Larson, Jacob Tremblay

about being jettisoned beyond Room and his desire to return to it after he has been removed to the comparatively labyrinthine house of his grandmother and her partner. When he and Ma return to Room to seek closure, he can no longer relate to it because the door is permanently open – its safeness breached. Jack's 'birth' in the wider world requires him to survive a trial – a disorientating ride rolled up in a rug in Old Nick's pick-up truck – which he does with minimal fuss. Ma's release from Room is more traumatic: she runs out screaming towards Jack, her deliverer.

If eight-year-old Jacob Tremblay's performance captures, like bottled lightning, Jack's immediate responses to the momentary (augmented by voiceover reflections), Brie Larson's courageous turn is characterised by watchfulness. Ma's every word and action in captivity is geared to maintaining Jack's cheerfulness, safety and engagement in their dreary environment

and monotonous existence; relieved of that responsibility, she unravels. Beyond giving Jack a toy car for his birthday, Sean Bridgers's Old Nick seems oblivious to his parenthood. In any case, Ma diverts him from the boy by keeping him sexually satisfied, at one point self-sacrificingly imploring him to take her to bed.

Jack, of course, had given her a reason to go on living when he was born two years into her imprisonment. The unctuous but aggressive female TV interviewer who triggers Ma's post-release breakdown by asking her if she was selfish not to find a way of liberating Jack earlier fails to understand that they sustained each other. Like Ma's hostile father (William H. Macy, cast against type), who sees Jack as the fruit of his daughter's defilement, the interviewer applies moral absolutism to a nightmarish situation in which survival and unconditional love superseded morality. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Ed Guiney

Screenplay

Emma Donoghue

Based on her novel

Director of Photography

Danny Cohen

Editor

Nathan Nugent

Production Designer

Ethan Tobman

Music

Stephen Rennicks

Production

Sound Mixer

Eric Fitz

Stephen Marian

Costume Designer

Lea Carlson

@Element Pictures, Room Productions Inc., Channel Four Television Corporation

Production Companies

Téléfilm Canada, Film4 and Bord

Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish

Film Board presents

in association with

Ontario Media

Development

Corporation

and FilmNation

Entertainment an

Element Pictures,

No Trace Camping

production in

association with

Duperele Films

A film by Lenny

Abrahamson

Developed with the

assistance of Film4

and Bord Scannán

na hÉireann/the

Irish Film Board

Executive Producers

Andrew Lowe

Emma Donoghue

Jesse Shapira

Jeff Arkuss

David Kosse

Rose Garnett

Tessa Ross

Film Extracts

Turtle: The Incredible

Journey (2009)

Cast

Brie Larson

Joy Newsome, 'Ma'

Jacob Tremblay

Jack Newsome

Joan Allen

Nancy Newsome

Sean Bridgers

Old Nick

Tom McCamus

Leo

William H. Macy

Robert Newsome

Cas Anvar

Dr Mittal

Amanda Brugel

Officer Parker

Wendy Crewson

talk show hostess

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Studiocanal Limited

Ma and her son Jack celebrate his fifth birthday in 'Room', a backyard shed equipped as a rudimentary domestic space. She was 17-year-old Joy Newsome when she was kidnapped and incarcerated here seven years previously. Jack doesn't know that he was fathered by their captor, 'Old Nick', who rapes Ma when he brings food, while Jack sits in a cupboard. Having never left Room, Jack has no conception of the outside world.

Fearing for their lives, Ma induces fake fever symptoms in Jack, but Old Nick refuses to take him to hospital. The next day, Ma conceals Jack in a rug and convinces Old Nick that he has died. Old Nick places the rug in the back of his pick-up truck, promising Ma

that he'll leave Jack's 'corpse' in nature. As coached by Ma, Jack jumps from the truck before Old Nick has driven far. Jack gives patrol-car officers enough information to determine Room's location. Ma is freed.

Jack and Ma recuperate in hospital. Ma's parents Nancy and Robert, who have divorced since the kidnapping, take Jack and Ma to her childhood home, where Nancy lives with her partner Leo. Robert can't bear to look at Jack and leaves. Old Nick is arrested. Ma is mortified by a TV interviewer's questioning; she attempts suicide and is rushed to hospital. Jack bonds with Nancy and Leo and befriends a boy of his own age. Joy recovers and comes home. She and Jack pay a final visit to Room.

Sherpa

Australia/United Kingdom/USA 2015

Director: Jennifer Peedom

Certificate 15 96m 6s

Reviewed by Hannah McGill

Few relationships stand as such vivid emblems of racial one-upmanship as that between the white Western adventurer and the native guide who undertakes the same challenge for none of the same glory. For reaching the summit of Everest in 1953, Edmund Hillary and his expedition leader John Hunt were knighted; their guide Tenzing Norgay was fobbed off with a George Medal.

As is eloquently expressed in Jennifer Peedom's clear-eyed and disciplined documentary, Sherpas have a completely different conception of the mountain they call 'Chomolungma', and don't relate to it as a challenge to be overcome; Sherpa guides climb in exchange for wages, albeit mean ones, while tourists pay handsomely for the privilege. Yet the famous model of inequality set up by Hillary and Tenzing still resonates among Sherpa people; and today's interconnected culture gives them access to more awareness of their historical and current subjugation.

Peedom was inspired to make a film on the empowerment of the Sherpas after an angry confrontation occurred between a guide and a European mountaineer on Everest in 2013. As it happened, she and her team were at the base camp filming the preparations for the 2014 ascent at the time of the worst accident in Everest's history: an avalanche that killed 16 Sherpa guides. In its aftermath, the angry and traumatised Sherpas organised to stop the climb until the government agreed to better pay and compensation for them.


Garnering opinion from the guides, the expedition leaders and the climbers, and presenting it in compassionate and unsensational terms, Peedom creates a subtle portrait of an extraordinary industrial dispute, beautifully offset by intimate scenes of the family of Phurba Tashi Sherpa as he debates whether or not to undertake his 22nd trip to the summit. "It's shameful to God," declares Phurba's mother. "If he were a famous monk, at least we could get blessings. The fame he gets from climbing the mountain is useless." Phurba's wife's take is more sober and sad: "He loves the mountain more than his family."

While cinematographer Renan Ozturk captures dazzling footage of the mountain, Peedom displays a superb eye for revealing human moments: the impatient climber who



Life in the balance: *Sherpa*

asks that the striking Sherpas be dealt with by their "owners"; the ambiguous position of expedition leader Russell Brice, who deeply sympathises with his own Sherpas but recoils from the militants he says are "spoiling their reputation" as cheery helpers; the Sherpa who cuts through the stalemate by simply telling the camera: "A lot of our friends died up there, and we're scared."

The resulting film is a quiet, complex account of the gradual fracturing of an outdated set of arrangements and attitudes, the setting for which commands a particular kind of respect. "You don't conquer the mountain," says Jamling Tenzing Norgay. "You crawl up, like a child into its mother's lap." 

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Bridget Ikin
John Smithson

Writer

Jennifer Peedom

Cinematography

& High-altitude

Director

Renan Ozturk

Cinematography

Hugh Miller

Ken Sauls

Editor

Christian Gazal

Composer

Antony Partos

Sound Designer

Sam Petty

©Felix Media Pty Ltd,
Arrow International
Media Limited and
Screen Australia

Production

Companies
Universal Pictures
and Screen

Australia present

in association

with Discovery

a Felix Media and

Arrow Media

production

in association with

Camp4 Collective,

Definition Films,

Jungleboys

Principal

development

and production

investor: Australian

Government,

Screen Australia

Executive

Producers

John Maynard

David Griffin

David Gross

Film Extracts

The Conquest of

Everest (1953)

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Part-subtitled

Distributor

Arrow Films

A documentary about the Sherpa people, focusing on the relationship between Sherpa guides and western climbers attempting the ascent of Everest.

In Khumjung village, Nepal, in April 2014, mountain guide Phurba Tashi Sherpa is preparing to summit Mount Everest (called Chomolungma by the Sherpa people) for the 22nd time, which will make him the world record-holder. His wife and family are resistant to his dangerous work. Journalist and climbing expert Ed Douglas contextualises the history of the Sherpa people's work as mountain guides. The children of Tenzing Norgay, who reached the summit of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953, explain the place of Chomolungma in the ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism as representing "the mother god of the Earth". On the mountain, expedition leader Russell Brice prepares his team of 25 Sherpas for a mission to the summit. He and other contributors detail the expansion of the mountaineering industry, the Sherpas' crucial place in it, the dangers they face and their increasing awareness of the credit they are due.

As Brice's climbers are acclimatising, a huge avalanche on the hazardous Khumbu Icefall kills and injures numerous Sherpa guides. Sherpas react with anger and agitate for the climbing season to be cancelled, out of respect for the dead and until the Nepalese government agrees to better pay and compensation for mountain guides. Government representatives visit the workers but make no commitment to their cause. Russell reluctantly cancels his climb, citing the rumour that his Sherpas have been threatened with violence by their more militant colleagues. Phurba tells his family that he will not go up the mountain again.

End captions relate that the government finally acceded to the Sherpas' demands, but that the climb had to be cancelled again in 2015 due to the Nepal earthquake.

Spotlight

USA 2015

Director: Tom McCarthy

Certificate 15 128m 33s

See Feature
on page 38


Reviewed by Matthew Taylor
"Just be sure you're right."

That was the grave warning handed out by *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee to reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), just prior to the famed duo's revelations of a rotten administration. In *Spotlight*, Tom McCarthy's equally engrossing true-life chronicle, it's Ben Bradlee Jr (John Slattery), special projects editor at the *Boston Globe*, who sounds the requisite weary note of caution. As well he might: his team is investigating not an erring presidency but an institution of comparable might and cloaked impenetrability – the Roman Catholic Church. Pakula's seminal Watergate drama remains a high benchmark for deliberate, conspiracy-shrouded newsroom manoeuvres – David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007), for one – and *Spotlight* can't help but be measured against it. Happily, McCarthy's film rises to the occasion with understated force and intelligence: his is an expert, finely tuned procedural that deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as its esteemed ancestor.

Titled after the *Globe*'s Pulitzer-winning special investigations unit, *Spotlight* handles a difficult subject – the covering up by Boston's hugely powerful archdiocese of systemic clerical abuse – in a manner that's candid yet devoid of sensationalism. Spanning the course of an incendiary few months at the *Globe* in 2001 and early 2002, McCarthy and Josh Singer's intricate script is dense with accumulative detail yet rarely feels overstuffed. It begins with the arrival of undaunted new editor Martin Baron (Liev Schreiber), who, keen to champion the *Globe*'s perhaps unsung investigative prowess, sets the *Spotlight* team to work on the case of John Geoghan, a retired priest then the subject



Paper chase: Michael Keaton

of multiple civil lawsuits for historical sexual abuse. Tucked away in a cramped basement office below the bustling *Globe* newsroom, the quartet of journalists – veteran Walter 'Robby' Robinson (Michael Keaton), wired lead writer Michael Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo) and reporters Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) and Matt Carroll (Brian D'Arcy James) – quickly find the scope of their investigation widening to encompass not just Geoghan but numerous other priests 

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Michael Sugar

Steve Golin

Nicole Rocklin

Blye Pagon Faust

Written by

Josh Singer

Tom McCarthy

Director of

Photography

Masanobu Takayanagi

Editor

Tom McArdle

Production Designer

Stephen Carter

Music

Howard Shore

Re-recording Mixer

Paul Hsu

Costume Designer

Wendy Chuck

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Production

Companies

Participant Media

and First Look

Media present an

Anonymous Content

production

A Rocklin/Faust

production

This production

participated in

The New York

State Governor's

Office of Motion

Picture & Television

Development's

Post Production

Credit Program

Executive Producers

Jeff Skoll

Jonathan King

Pierre Omidyar

Michael Bederman

Bard Dorros

Tom Ortenberg

Peter Lawson

Xavier Marchand

Cast

Mark Ruffalo

Michael Rezendes,

'Mike'

Michael Keaton

Walter Robinson,

'Robby'

Rachel McAdams

Sacha Pfeiffer

Liev Schreiber

Martin Baron, 'Marty'

John Slattery

Ben Bradlee Jr

Brian d'Arcy James

Matt Carroll

Stanley Tucci

Mitchell Garabedian

Billy Crudup

Eric MacLish

Paul Guilfoyle

Pete Conley

Jamey Sheridan

Jim Sullivan

Len Cariou

Cardinal Bernard Law

Neal Huff

Phil Saviano

Michael Cyril

Creighton

Joe Crowley

Michael Countryman

Richard Gilman

[uncredited]

Richard Jenkins

voice of Richard Sipe

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Distributor

E1 Films

Boston, 2001. 'Boston Globe' editor Martin Baron asks the newspaper's *Spotlight* investigative team – Walter Robinson, Michael Rezendes, Sacha Pfeiffer and Matt Carroll – to examine the case of retired Catholic priest John Geoghan, the subject of multiple civil lawsuits for historical sexual abuse. At Baron's urging, the 'Globe' petitions the court to release sealed church records covering Geoghan's past movements. Interviews with Geoghan's victims and those of other local priests lead the *Spotlight* team to suspect that Cardinal Bernard Law, Boston's archbishop, covered up serial clerical abuse by relocating offenders to different parishes. Rezendes gains the trust of Mitchell Garabedian, a lawyer handling many of the Geoghan suits. Carroll

finds archdiocese directories listing various priests on unexplained sick leave between reassignments; the number of local offenders becomes substantially higher than previously imagined. Robinson and Pfeiffer's enquiries are rebuffed by attorneys hired by the church to settle abuse claims privately. The investigation is halted after the 9/11 attacks. Weeks later, Garabedian tips off Rezendes that some of the sealed Geoghan records have temporarily been made public for a pending case. Rezendes obtains the files, which prove Law's complicity in covering Geoghan's tracks. When the 'Globe' publishes its exposé in January 2002, the *Spotlight* office is deluged with calls from other abuse victims.

in the Boston area. Victims' testimonies lead them to suspect that Cardinal Bernard Law, Boston's formidable archbishop, covered up the abuse by reassigning Geoghan and others to new, unsuspecting parishes. Needing hard evidence, the *Globe* petitions the court to release sealed church records that may prove Law's complicity. When Slattery's Bradlee Jr gasps, "We're going after Law?" the double meaning of the surname is plainly felt.

McCarthy is no stranger to the lot of the crusading journalist, having played ethically conflicted hack Scott Templeton in the final season of HBO's *The Wire*. The latter's focus on the slow, pedantic, hard-won accretion of evidence is recalled here, as are the frequent question marks over what's true and what's fabricated. In a city where some 40 per cent of the populace identifies as Catholic, the stakes are especially high – anything less than "bulletproof" (the real Pfeiffer's word) veracity could result in a major backlash for the paper. The 9/11 attacks and the resulting national mood only compound this urgency.

Progress is gradual, with many brick walls hit as victims are consulted and lawyers badgered. One of these, renowned civil litigator Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci), proves to be a key ally. Others, such as Billy Crudup's supercilious church-appointed attorney, cheerfully parry Spotlight's enquiries into the many private payoffs sanctioned by the archdiocese. There are shades of Deep Throat, Watergate's shadowy informant, in the introduction of ex-priest and psychotherapist Richard Sipe (played by an unbilled Richard Jenkins as a voice on the phone), whose research paints clerical abuse as a "genuine psychiatric phenomenon". Meanwhile it's Garabedian who figures prominently in the film's momentary flirtation with the trappings of the conspiracy thriller, providing a vintage park-bench tipoff that triggers a race against time to secure vital documents.

While McCarthy's crisp, unfussy treatment allows few visual flourishes, it's an approach – bolstered by cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi's precise framing and fluent tracking shots through the *Globe*'s boxy offices – that pays dividends with the intricate narrative. There's the odd symbolic gesture: a montage of Spotlight's door-to-door interviews has the camera repeatedly pull back to reveal churches dwarfing the characters and apartments below. While not subtle, it's a blunt commentary on the extent to which the church is embedded in the everyday fabric of Bostonian life. However, there's little in the way of anticlerical liberal righteousness, rather a deep sadness felt by everybody – including the mostly Catholic Spotlight journalists – at the dizzying magnitude of the scandal.

The uniformly strong ensemble cast largely avoids any grandstanding moments, and manufactured drama is swerved, while Howard Shore's sober score is applied with restraint. Bradlee Sr's exhortation was one ultimately heeded by the real Spotlight unit, the *Globe* forgoing early publication until the facts were unassailable. Rigorous and patient to the last, McCarthy's film is a becoming tribute to their due diligence. **S**

Swung

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Colin Kennedy
Certificate 18 87m 28s

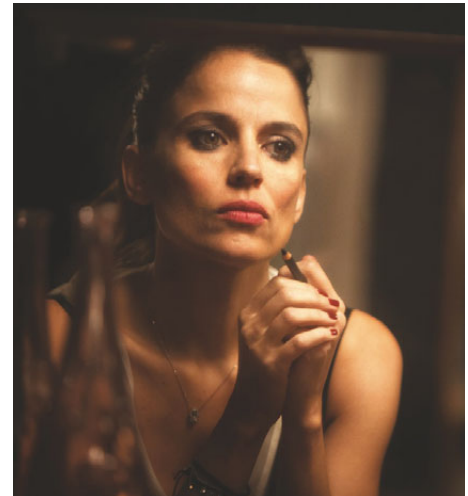
Reviewed by Frances Morgan

There's something anachronistic about this low-budget Scottish drama, and it's not just the title – although that certainly doesn't help. While swinging as a term for group sex between couples is still alive and well, according to Google, the word is indelibly linked to the 1970s. It's an idea of sexual experimentation that has the monogamous couple at its centre, a safe unit that can be returned to after a temporary adventure. There is no reason why a thoroughly modern film shouldn't be made about this enduring phenomenon, but *Swung* is not it. For a start, its protagonists seem to find the idea that they might be attracted to other people entirely novel, yet both are youngish, middle-class creatives, web- and porn-literate – more likely to be comparing Tinder profiles and reading articles about polyamory than excitedly perusing a clunky hook-up website.

Then again, as we are reminded repeatedly, these are desperate times for unemployed graphic designer David and his journalist girlfriend Alice. David has erectile dysfunction disorder, made light of in an early scene in which Alice slices carrots while watching a YouTube video of a penile implant. The humour seems retro, as do the reasons implied for David's condition: a business failure that leaves Alice as the breadwinner, plus an unsympathetic control-freak of an ex-wife who micromanages access to his daughter. Who wouldn't feel emasculated?

As the resolutely unsympathetic David, Owen McDonnell's expressions run the gamut from worried and resentful to put-upon. Elena Anaya's Alice is a more complex, driven character, who sublimates her own desire for anonymous sex into helping her partner and her career (she pitches a story on swinging to save her job at a 'lifestyle magazine' – another weirdly dated premise).

Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and Gaspar Noé's *Love* have recently demonstrated that, if one is to make a cinema film 'about' sex in the hypersexualised digital age, it needs to at least appear critical or innovative in some way, either formally novel or extremely graphic. These



Permutations: Elena Anaya

are hard acts to follow, as is the camp capitalist fantasy of 50 *Shades of Grey*, but director Colin Kennedy could have countered all those films' knowing reliance on style with something emotionally intimate, lo-fi and relatable, something that celebrated everyday sexualities as complex and fluid. Ultimately, though, there is a lack of sympathy in his portrayals of the film's sexual adventurers. The working-class couple that Alice and David first encounter are drawn as uncouth and ridiculous, their enthusiastic sex something to run away from, literally.

The potentially most interesting character, Dolly, a charismatic Californian woman who runs a monthly sex party, is at first a liberator but ultimately a victim: she reveals to a newly pregnant Alice that she is dying of cancer, and that she regrets giving away a child for adoption during the time of the 'women's movement'. With that moral knell as its preface, her party can't help but be bittersweet, even as it's one of the film's most lively and irreverent sequences, coming on like a DIY *Eyes Wide Shut*. Its main function turns out to be to reinforce the bond between the film's primary couple, a conclusion as conservative as it is unsurprising. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Producer
Brian Coffey
Writer
Ewan Morrison
Director of Photography
Jean-François Hensgens
Editor

David Arthur
Production Designer
Tom Sayer
Composer
Richard Harvey
Sound Recordist
Peter Brill
Costume Designer
Kelly Cooper Barr

©Swung Films Ltd
Production Companies
Creative Scotland presents in association with Boudica Films a Sigma Films production

A Colin Kennedy film
Supported by The National Lottery through Creative Scotland
Executive Producers
Gillian Berrie
Rebecca Long
Ian Davies

Cast
Elena Anaya
Alice
Owen McDonnell
David
Elizabeth McGovern
Dolly
In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor
Metrodome Distribution Ltd

Glasgow, the present. Alice and David, a couple in their thirties, visit a sex therapist to discuss David's erectile dysfunction. David is going through a divorce and is unemployed following the failure of his design business. One morning, while waiting in a phone queue for the benefits office, he logs on to a website for swingers. Alice, a journalist on a lifestyle magazine, discovers his online activities and, initially angry, shares a fantasy of group sex, which arouses him. Alice pitches a story about swinging to her editor and signs herself and David up to a website to meet other couples. They meet a couple in a bar but do not go through with sex. Their next encounter with a couple is more promising, but David becomes jealous

and leaves. He tries to establish a good relationship with his young daughter and his ex-wife. David and Alice meet Dolly Adams, an American sex worker who runs a monthly sex party at a hotel. The couple take part in a tantric exercise initiated by Dolly. Alice finds out that she is pregnant but doesn't tell David. She visits Dolly again. Dolly reveals that she is dying of breast cancer. Alice prepares to write her feature, now focused around Dolly's parties. She goes to Dolly's party alone after an argument with David. He follows her and searches for her in the 'black room', a space for anonymous group sex – but Alice hasn't in fact entered the room. She and David are reconciled; she tells him of the pregnancy and they plan a new life together.

The 33

USA 2014
Director: Patricia Riggen
Certificate 12A 126m 59s

Reviewed by Violet Lucca

Prestige pictures today can be summed up with five words: 'based on a true story'. There are several possible reasons why we're currently being asked to relive so much history: because, in the age of YouTube and Vine, executives believe audiences care only about real people; because these films can be marketed as inspirational, important stories and are shoo-ins for awards; because there's built-in buzz about comparing what actually happened with the fictionalised version; or simply because Hollywood really is out of ideas this time.

The results of this trend have been, with few exceptions, uniform in their blandness and slapdash self-righteousness. *The 33*, a dramatisation of the 2010 Chilean mining accident that left 33 men trapped 700m below ground for 69 days, is, assuredly, a total snooze. Divided between those in the pit, their family members and the complex government-run rescue efforts, the film simply has too many people involved to get past broad caricature or deliver exposition with any subtlety. The homeless, alcoholic Darío Segovia (Juan Pablo Raba) finds faith during his confinement, but his evangelical transformation takes place in under five minutes, immediately following a dramatic attack of the DTs. (Ironically, this incredibly complicated character arc was invented for the film, as if there wasn't enough going on already.)


However, *The 33* stands apart from its Oscar and Bafta-seeking brethren mostly because it is the only BOATS movie this year whose source events unfolded in our current manic 24-hour news-cycle environment. (Undoubtedly part of the interest of *Spotlight* is seeing local investigative print journalism before its fall.) The many international news outlets covering the story provided interactive profiles of the men, snippets of videos they sent to the surface after rescuers made contact, maps of the mine and mock-ups of how engineers were planning on pulling them out – in short, a far more holistic picture of the accident as it happened than anything a two-hour film could possibly contain.

So what is the function of this abridged version,



Edge of darkness: *The 33*

given that it's not terribly immersive or cinematic, and who is it for? *The 33*'s credits state that it's an adaptation of Héctor Tobar's *Deep Down Dark*, a narrative account based on exclusive interviews with the miners. 'Exclusive' is the key word here: as the film shows, the only time the miners really start to fight among themselves is when they get word from the surface that Mario Sepúlveda (Antonio Banderas) considers himself the 'leader' of their group and has signed a lucrative book deal before anyone else. After the men nearly come to blows over it, Mario says he'll only do a book if everyone can profit. Who got to tell the story (and for how much) wasn't simply a matter of pride: it was never certain that the San Esteban Primera Mining Company, which had ignored warnings about the mine's possible collapse, would provide compensation, so cashing in on their ordeal was all the men had.

The double-edged sword of media is nothing new, but in a country like Chile, where the class and racial divide is so pronounced, getting that attention – and getting saved – was a disruption to the status quo. That cruel paradox comes into play again with the film's international cast, which relegates actors of indigenous ancestry to lesser roles and puts bad spray tans on the leads. But at the very least it's refreshing to hear Spanish-accented English appear without subtitles in a mainstream film such as this – and we get a Don Francisco cameo too. 

Trumbo

USA 2015
Director: Jay Roach
Certificate 15 123m 59s


See Industry,
page 14

Reviewed by Violet Lucca

What's more surprising: that a film about screenwriting and Academy Awards would contain so many grandiose speeches, or that a Black List-friendly script would result in such a palatable, Wikipedia'd account of the Hollywood blacklist, complete with sanctimonious ending? Like Jay Roach's previous leftie-friendly movies *Game Change* (on the rise of Sarah Palin in the 2008 US presidential election) and *Recount* (about the contested 2000 US presidential election), *Trumbo* bounces along at a joyful enough pace, taking us where we need to go to hit the next historical milestone while maintaining a completely uninteresting TV visual aesthetic. (There are few things more depressing, after a lifetime of feasting on the lush colours and decor of the 50s in glorious Technicolor, than seeing those same styles rendered in the crisp flatness of digital.) A lazy high-school teacher could – and probably will – show this to their class while doing a unit on the Red Scare.

Similarly, Dalton Trumbo the man is so sanitised and laconically drawn that even his typically atypical creative quirks – doing rewrites on his typewriter in the bath, swigging whisky or popping benzos to meet Poverty Row-studio deadlines – feel as if they are borrowed from *Adventure Time* rather than Hemingway. (Then again, we might've already passed the point in history where writers like Papa are necessarily cartoonish.) At one point, fellow blacklisted writer Arlen Hird (a visibly nervous Louis CK) says, "You talk like a radical but live like a rich guy." Leaving aside CK's atrocious delivery (he's perhaps the only 'actor' at his level of fame who can't even believably lie in a bed, dying of lung cancer), this statement gets at Trumbo's contradictions – supporting workers' rights from his ranch just north of Los Angeles. Rather than building towards introspection or further condemnation from his allies (he's portrayed as the de facto leader of the group), this contradiction is never again addressed or expanded on; it's essentially an angry tweet.

Such disjointed confrontations, always between two people, form the narrative's structure: a black prison inmate delivers a speech about how he's neither a 'magical negro' nor an illiterate charity case; Trumbo's wife Cleo (Diane Lane) gives a speech about how his immense workload is turning him into a bully, so Trumbo responds with a speech about how he has to support the family; Edward G. Robinson (Michael Stuhlbarg) defends his concession to HUAC with a speech, so Trumbo responds with another speech. Perhaps the greatest irony of this approach is that the real-life writer truly understood the importance of silence in the medium – look no further than the final scene of *Roman Holiday* (1953) for proof.

However, the person who benefits most from being on the right side of history (while doing the least) is Kirk Douglas (Dean O'Gorman), presented as the Young Turk with enoughchutzpah to break the blacklist by insisting that Trumbo publicly receive screenwriting credit for 1960's *Spartacus*. (We know 

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Mike Medavoy
Edward McGurn
Robert Katz

Screenplay

Mikko Alanne
Craig Borten
Michael Thomas

Screen Story

José Rivera
Based on the book
Deep Down Dark
by Héctor Tobar

Director of

Photography
Checco Varese

Editor

Michael Tronick

Production Designer

Marco Niro

Music Composed by

James Horner

Sound Mixer

Santiago Núñez

Costume Designer

Paco Delgado

©Half Circle LLC

Production

Companies

Alcon Entertainment
presents a Phoenix

Pictures production

Executive Producers

Carlos Eugenio Lavín
Leopoldo Enriquez
Alan Zhang
José Luis Escobar

Cast

Antonio Banderas

Mario Sepúlveda

Rodrigo Santoro

Laurence Golborne

Juliette Binoche

Maria Segovia

James Brolin

Jeff Hart

Bob Gunton

President Piñera

Gabriel Byrne

Andre Sougarret

Lou Diamond

Phillips

Don Lucho

Mario Casas

Alex Vega

Jacob Vargas

Edison Peña

Juan Pablo Raba

Darío Segovia

Oscar Nuñez

Yonni Barrios

Tenoch Huerta

Carlos Mamani

Marco Treviño

José Henríquez

Adriana Barraza

Marta Salinas

Kate Del Castillo

Katty

Cote de Pablo

Jessica

Elizabeth De Razzo

Susana Valenzuela

Naomi Scott

Escarlette

Mario Kreutzberger

Don Francisco

Dolby Digital/

Dolby Atmos

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Part-subtitled

Distributor

Warner Bros. Pictures

International (UK)

Copiapó, Chile, 2010. A group of miners hold a retirement party for their oldest co-worker. The following morning, the miners take a bus to the San José mine in the Atacama desert. The foreman warns one of the owners of the mine's weakness but is ignored. The mine collapses. All 33 miners make it to a shelter, which has three days' rations. The miners' families arrive at the mine gates. The minister of mining promises that he'll get the men out, but problems

arise with the government-run rescue operation. A medical centre, beds and a school called 'Camp Hope' are set up for the families. After 17 days, the rescuers successfully drill into the refuge and start sending down food and supplies. After 69 days, the shaft is wide enough to bring the miners up to the surface safely.

The San Esteban Primera Mining Company never paid the miners for their time, and was not found guilty of any wrongdoing.

that the blacklisting is over because, after attending the *Spartacus* premiere, Cleo starts crying at her vanity table and says, "It's over, isn't it?" In reality, Douglas attempted to distance himself from Trumbo, and had little or nothing to do with him being hired for the project.

Gossip columnist Hedda Hopper (a scene-chewing Helen Mirren) gets at part of the studios' motivation for cooperating with HUAC when she yells at Louis B. Mayer, telling him that dubious communist loyalties are "exactly what people expect from a business run by kikes!" But there were financial benefits from these show trials too: aside from curbing the power of various trade unions, the blacklisted writers – formerly among the highest paid in the business – were now available at discounted rates. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Michael London
Janice Williams
Shivani Rawat
Monica Levinson
Nimitt Mankad
John McNamara
Kevin Kelly Brown
Written by
John McNamara
Based on the book
Dalton Trumbo
by Bruce Cook
Director of
Photography
Jim Denault
Edited by
Alan Baumgarten
Production
Designer
Mark Ricker
Music
Theodore Shapiro
Production
Sound Mixer
Dick Hansen
Costume Designer
Daniel Orlandi

©Trumbo
Productions, LLC
Production
Companies
S H Pictures
presents a

Groundswell
production
A Jay Roach film
Executive Producer
Kelly Mullen
Film Extracts
Roman Holiday
(1953)
Spartacus (1960)
The Brave One
(1956)
Thirty Seconds
over Tokyo (1944)

Cast
Bryan Cranston
Dalton Trumbo
Adewale
Akinnuoye-Agbaje
Virgil Brooks
Louis C.K.
Arlen Hird
David James Elliott
John Wayne
Elle Fanning
Niki Trumbo
John Goodman
Frank King
Diane Lane
Cleo Trumbo
Michael Stuhlbarg
Edward G. Robinson
Alan Tudyk
Iam MacLellan

Hunter
Helen Mirren
Hedda Hopper
Dan Bakke
Roy Brewer
Roger Bart
Buddy Ross
Christian Berkel
Otto Preminger
Peter Mackenzie
Robert Kenny
Dean O'Gorman
Kirk Douglas
Richard Portnow
Louis B. Mayer
Stephen Root
Hymie King

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[1.85:1]

Distributor
El Films

Los Angeles, 1947. Screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and his family are at a cinema when a newsreel narrated by gossip columnist Hedda Hopper derides the set builders' union strike and claims that Trumbo and others are communist infiltrators in Hollywood. A man throws his Coke at Trumbo after the film. Later that year, Trumbo is found in contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The 'Hollywood Ten' – Trumbo and the other artists cited for contempt of Congress – are discharged from their jobs without pay. Their plans to appeal to the Supreme Court are dashed when liberal-leaning Justice Rutledge dies of a brain haemorrhage. Trumbo serves 11 months in a federal prison in Ashland, Kentucky. On his release he goes to work for a Poverty Row studio, using multiple pseudonyms and writing several scripts a week. Other blacklisted writers follow suit. In 1957, Trumbo wins an Oscar for 'The Brave One', which he wrote under a pen name. Kirk Douglas asks him to work on the script for 'Spartacus'; in September 1958, Otto Preminger asks him to adapt Leon Uris's 'Exodus' into a screenplay. He receives full credit for both. In 1961, President Kennedy crosses American Legion picket lines to see 'Spartacus'. In 1970, Trumbo wins the Writers Guild of America Laurel Award for lifetime achievement.

Victor Frankenstein

USA 2015

Director: Paul McGuigan

Certificate 12A 109m 41s

Reviewed by Kim Newman

"You think you know this story," begins Daniel Radcliffe's narration, over an image of a lightning storm crackling above a castle – which specifically invokes James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* rather than Mary Shelley's 1818 novel. It's a reasonably witty set-up for a film that scrambles elements of so many previous incarnations of its title character – and the monster often confused with him – that it appropriately turns out to be a stitched-together, malformed, shambling creature.

Many of the ingredients of Paul McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* are drawn from the file of things popularly known about the story that turn out to be additions made by Whale and his many successors. Whale's Frankenstein had a hunchbacked assistant named Fritz, and sequels brought in Bela Lugosi as a broken-necked character called Ygor, but the only prior film in which Frankenstein has a malformed assistant named Igor is Mel Brooks's parodic *Young Frankenstein* (1974), which explains the 'Fronkonsteen' gag. The odd high concept of telling the tale from Igor's viewpoint has precedents in the Paul Naschy vehicle *El jorobado de la morgue* (*The Hunchback of the Morgue*, 1973) and the CGI cartoon *Igor* (2008). Here, Igor is deconstructed to the point that he barely qualifies as an Igor; initially the familiarly bowed and gurning Quasimodo lookalike, Radcliffe is swiftly cured of his hump (thanks to the draining of a fluid-filled abscess) and fitted with a corset that enables him to walk upright and gives him romantic aspirations, which ultimately estrange him from the erratic monster-making project of his mentor.

Max Landis's overcooked screenplay draws much of its conception of the scientist from Terence Fisher's Hammer Films series, which ran from *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) to *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (1974). James McAvoy's splendidly overplayed, bipolar visionary is very different from Peter Cushing's icy genius, and evokes Peter O'Toole's mad Crusoe in an earlier retelling of a familiar story from an



Creative control: James McAvoy, Daniel Radcliffe

unfamiliar perspective, Jack Gold's *Man Friday* (1975). As in the Hammer films, an assistant's hot-or-cold commitment to (mad) science and the interference of authority figures derail Frankenstein's genius so that his great work leads only to a monster rampage. In one way, this is even-handed – Frankenstein is mad and wrong but so are the hidebound moralists who dismiss his work as being against God and nature.

For a Frankenstein film, *Victor Frankenstein* gives its monsters short shrift. Frankenstein's initial experiment is a bizarre 'meat sculpture' chimpanzee named Gordon, which escapes from a grotesque public demonstration. The finale brings on a lumbering, bald giant who seems patterned on Dave Prowse's unimpressive lump in Jimmy Sangster's Hammer parody *The Horror of Frankenstein* (1970). For Shelley, the crucial moment comes *after* the monster has been brought to life, when his creator cruelly rejects him... Landis and McGuigan invert this by having Frankenstein smitten with his newborn monster, only for the thing to turn out to be a soulless machine and simple plot device. This earns points for being antithetical to most great readings of the role, from Boris Karloff in Whale's *Frankenstein* to Xavier Samuel in Bernard Rose's 2015 take on the story – but basically it means that Frankenstein and Igor have used up so much of the story that there's little room for Shelley's greatest, most interesting creation. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
John Davis
Screenplay
Max Landis
Screen Story
Max Landis
Director of
Photography
Fabian Wagner
Film Editors
Charlie Phillips
Andrew Hulme
Production Designer
Eve Stewart
Music
Craig Armstrong
Sound Mixer
Colin Nicolson
Costume Designer
Jany Temime

Company production
Made in association
with TSG
Entertainment
Executive Producers
Ira Shuman
Derek Dauchy

Cast
Daniel Radcliffe
Igor Strausman
James McAvoy
Victor Frankenstein
Jessica Brown
Findlay
Lorelei
Andrew Scott
Inspector Turpin
Freddie Fox
Finnegan
Charles Dance
Frankenstein
Daniel Mays
Barnaby
Callum Turner
Alistair
Bronson Webb
Rafferty

Spencer Wilding
Nathaniel
Robin Pearce
Baron Bormine

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
20th Century Fox
International (UK)

London, the mid-19th century. A nameless hunchbacked circus clown, self-taught as a doctor, impresses genius Victor Frankenstein by performing an emergency bone-setting procedure on Lorelei, an acrobat who has fallen from the high wire. Victor rescues the hunchback from the circus, treats his deformity and names him Igor. Victor and Igor embark on experiments involving the creation of life. An experiment with a chimpanzee impresses ambitious aristocrat Finnegan, who finances grander ventures, intent on controlling the technology for his own ends. Igor and Lorelei become lovers, though she is sceptical about Frankenstein's work. Inspector Turpin, a religious policeman determined to thwart Victor's affronts to God, is injured when he stages an unauthorised raid on the scientists' laboratory. When Victor departs for Finnegan's Scottish castle to continue his work, Igor breaks with him. Finnegan has Igor thrown in the Thames, but he survives. Separately, Igor and Turpin intervene in Victor's climactic experiment. Finnegan and Turpin are killed as a lightning storm brings a giant humanoid creature to life. Realising that the monster is soulless and vicious, Victor and Igor destroy it. Victor leaves to continue his work elsewhere.

A War

Denmark/Norway/France/USA 2015

Director: Tobias Lindholm

Certificate 15 115m 7s

See Rushes,
page 11

Reviewed by Lisa Mullen

Can a war criminal be a good man? That's the question at the heart of this utterly gripping drama about a Danish army commander brought to trial for killing 11 innocent civilians in Afghanistan. However much we might want the answer to be simple, writer-director Tobias Lindholm is determined to deny us easy judgements. Instead, he makes us wait, and watch, and look very closely at Company Commander Claus Pedersen (Pilou Asbaek) and ask how, exactly, his war has brought him to this terrible crisis.

In many ways, *A War* fits into the prevailing aesthetic of recent combat films, which have increasingly contracted into intimate pockets of claustrophobic intensity. Even mainstream Hollywood offerings such as Peter Berg's *Lone Survivor* (and even, arguably, David Ayer's *World War II* film *Fury*), chose to focus tightly on the mess and squalor of first-person experience rather than bringing out the big guns of large-scale spectacle; the British-made *Kajaki: The True Story* similarly drove home its 'war is hell' message by immersing the viewer in a no-win situation of almost unbearable tension.

Lindholm's post-Dogme adherence to handheld, naturally lit authenticity takes this tendency to its extreme. He follows Claus's nerve-shredding experience of a war zone in which long periods of boredom are interspersed with sudden moments of brutal terror, embedding the camera tightly into each scene so that it's impossible not to feel every shell that lands, every burst of automatic fire, as a personal assault. This intimacy is not reserved for the battle scenes alone, however, but is applied to everything that passes in front of his lens. He intercuts the Afghan drama with extended scenes in Denmark, where Claus's wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) grinds through the daily battle to bring up their three young children on her own. Domestic emergencies, such as a trip to the hospital to pump the toddler's stomach, receive as much unflinching attention as the Taliban ambush that leads to Claus's fatal decision. With astonishing economy, Lindholm sketches in a whole marriage via a few rushed calls on the satellite phone, and this is essential, since it's Maria's input that proves crucial in the second half of the film, when Claus's trial takes place.

In many ways *A War* is a companion piece to Lindholm's previous film, *A Hijacking* (2012), which similarly juxtaposed claustrophobic menace with a kind of choking banality, and which also cast Asbaek in the lead. As in the earlier film, Asbaek is riveting here, delivering an astonishingly restrained and nuanced performance that locks in your sympathy without ever straying into sentiment. Novotny, too, is compelling as she deftly locates moments of baffled loneliness within her character's briskly cheerful daily routine (and almost single-handedly provides some female balance in an otherwise male-dominated narrative). The rest of the cast match the leads' high standard: Søren Malling and Dar Salim, who both also co-starred in *A Hijacking*, crop up again here as Claus's smoothly unflappable lawyer and his best friend Bisma respectively;



One man's war: Pilou Asbaek

and the three young actors who play Claus and Maria's children, Cecilie Elise Sondergaard, Adam Chessa and Andreas Buch Borgwardt, deserve credit too for their performances in what look like largely improvised scenes.

By rounding out the details of Claus's emotional landscape, Lindholm makes a strong case for a compassionate reading of his split-second decision in the heat of battle, but he stops short of bestowing narrative absolution on his morally battered protagonist. Of course, had he chosen to tell this story from the point of view of the civilians caught up in the mess, he would have made a very different film; indeed, he seems to make a deliberate attempt to address the lack of an Afghan perspective by giving one local

family a key role in the unfolding tragedy. Yet the English translation of the title points to the film's complete insistence on personal contingency – this is just one man's war, Lindholm seems to say, and of course everyone involved would have a different, equally particular story to tell. The very realism of the post-Dogme methods Lindholm adopts asks questions about what reality truly is. Can a film be unbiased? Is the camera a reliable witness? Can it see things from the inside? Even in a court of law, recorded facts may slip away into the gaps between individual agendas and experiences. What makes the film so haunting is the ineluctability of Claus's own self-judgement, a truth that is clearly apparent no matter how carefully he keeps it locked up and out of sight. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Producers

René Ezra
Tomas Radoor

Written by
Tobias Lindholm

Director of

Photography

Magnus Nordenhof
Janck

Editor

Adam Nielsen

Production Designer

Thomas Greve

Music

Sune Rose Wagner

Sound Designer

Morten Green

Costume Designer

Louize Nissen

©Nordisk Film

Production A/S

Production

Companies

Nordisk Film

Production A/S

presents

Produced by Nordisk

Film Production A/S

With the support

of Det Danske

Filminstitut

In co-operation with
DR, Nordisk Film & TV

Fond and StudioCanal

Supported by

Sundance Institute/

Mahindra Global

Filmmaking Award

Executive Producers

Henrik Zein

Lena Haugaard

Olivier Courson

Ron Halpern

Cast

Pilou Asbaek

Claus Michael

Pedersen

Tuva Novotny

Maria Pedersen

Søren Malling

Martin R. Olsen

Charlotte Munck

Kajsa Danning

Dar Salim

Najib Bisma

Dulfi Al-Jabouri

Lutfi Lasse Hassan

Cecilie Elise

Søndergaard

Figne

Adam Chessa

Julius

Andreas Buch

Borgwardt

Elliot

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Subtitles

Distributor

Studiocanal Limited

Danish theatrical title

Krigen

Afghanistan, present day. A small band of Danish soldiers are on patrol in a Taliban area when one of their number is killed after stepping on a mine. Back at base, company commander Claus Pederson has to pull his exhausted and traumatised team back together with a combination of compassion and clear leadership. But he too is longing for home, where his wife Maria is struggling to bring up their three children alone. Their young son Julius is in trouble at school, and Maria has to rush their toddler Elliot to hospital after he accidentally swallows some pills.

Determined to show leadership, Claus decides to go with his men to a village in enemy territory, to rescue a frightened Afghan family who have begged for their protection. The men find that all the family have been slaughtered and the Taliban has set an ambush. Under heavy fire, one of Claus's men is badly injured. Calling for air support, Claus sends a message that he has visual confirmation of the enemy fighters' position, even though he can't see where they are. A few days later he is arrested for war crimes and sent home to Denmark: he is responsible for the deaths of 11 innocent civilians. Tormented by guilt, he is nevertheless persuaded by Maria to lie about the incident in court, and when his story is backed up by one of his men, he is acquitted. However, his life has been destroyed by the experience.

Youth

Italy/France/United Kingdom/Switzerland 2015
Director: Paolo Sorrentino

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

With *Youth*, Paolo Sorrentino makes his second foray into English-language features. The first, *This Must Be the Place* (2011), proved an oddly unfocused effort, with Sean Penn as an ageing goth rock star implausibly searching for the Nazi war criminal who wronged his father. It lacked the sophistication, and the unsettling black humour, of his 'Servillo tetralogy' – the four features he's made starring Toni Servillo, the actor who, despite their difference in age (Servillo is a decade or more Sorrentino's senior), has come to seem like his director's surrogate, rather as Mastroianni was for Fellini.

Youth finds Sorrentino back on track. In some ways, indeed, it plays out like a reworking of his most recent feature, *The Great Beauty* (2013), in which Servillo's socialite intellectual surveyed the decadent Roman scene around him with a mixture of world-weariness and nostalgic regret. Comparisons with *La dolce vita* (1960) were inevitable; but this time around it's a later, lesser-known Fellini movie, *Orchestral Rehearsal* (1978), that often comes to mind. Our guide in *Youth* is Fred Ballinger (Michael Caine), a British composer staying at an Alpine spa hotel; he is determinedly retired – so much so that, even when the chance of a knighthood is dangled before him by an importunate Buck House envoy, he refuses to conduct a performance of his most popular work, 'Simple Songs', before a royal audience.

Ballinger, who with his mane of white hair brushed back even looks a little like Servillo, is provided with a sardonic companion in the form of his old friend Mick Boyle (Harvey Keitel), an American movie director. The chemistry between Caine and Keitel is constantly diverting to watch, whether they're talking about a girl they both once fancied and may or may not have bedded, or comparing notes on their current urinary prowess. ("Did you take a piss today?" Fred asks Mick. "Four drops. You?" "The same, more or less." "More – or less?" "Less.")

Fred and Mick's relationship is enriched, or complicated, by a family connection: Fred's daughter Lena (Rachel Weisz) is married to Mick's son Julian (Ed Stoppard). Their marriage, or rather its breakdown, provides a major plot point in a film not overburdened with plot. Lena, who's been staying at the spa with her father (and sharing his bedroom), heads off to join her husband for a vacation. She's soon back, in floods of tears; he's left her for a younger woman. This, it turns out, is the pop singer Paloma Faith, playing herself. Mick denounces her as "the most insignificant woman on the face of the planet", but Julian insists that she's "really good in bed". Though Faith's wooden cameo suggests that Mick is maybe nearer the truth, her presence is the pretext for a delirious spoof music video of her hit number 'Can't Rely on You', presented as Lena's nightmare.

It's incidental elements such as these that offer the chief pleasure of *Youth*. The other guests at the hotel include a baroque variety of individuals: there's a loincloth-clad guru set on levitation (and who apparently achieves it); a mountainously fat man with a huge tattoo of Karl Marx on his back who hobbles about with a stick but whom we then see flat on his back



Spa trek: Michael Caine, Harvey Keitel

playing keepee-uppy with a tennis ball; a lithe young masseuse with graceful movements and cab-door ears; Miss Universe, who walks into the hotel's thermal pool gloriously naked, leaving Fred and Mick agape, and who proves to be far less of a bimbo than anyone imagines; and a starchy middle-aged couple sitting at their table day after day without saying a word to each other, while Fred and Mick take bets on whether they'll ever speak. One day the woman rises, deals her companion a ringing slap around the face and stalks out; Fred and Mick later come upon the couple having noisy, enthusiastic sex up against a tree. And towards the end, Jane Fonda shows up in a selfless cameo as an over-the-hill

Hollywood diva, caked in makeup like an aged Joan Crawford, to denounce Mick's film project ("All you know how to see is your own death").

All this – not least a sweetly lyrical moment when Fred sits in an Alpine meadow conducting a symphony of cowbells and birds – rather crowds out any serious message Sorrentino may have intended about ageing and regret. In some quarters, *Youth* has been written off as pretentious self-indulgence, all style and precious little substance. But when the style is as stylish as this – much aided by Luca Bignazzi's glorious widescreen photography – to reproach it for lacking substance seems like chiding champagne for being low on nourishment. ☺

Credits and Synopsis

A film by

[i.e. directed and written by]

Paolo Sorrentino

Produced by

Nicola Giuliano

Francesca Cima

Carlotta Calori

Screenplay

Translated by

Virginia Jewiss

Director of

Photography

Luca Bignazzi

Editor

Cristiano Travaglioli

Production Designer

Ludovica Ferrario

Music

David Lang

Sound

Emanuele Cecere

Costume Designer

S.p.A. BNL Gruppo

Carlo Poggioni

©Indigo Film,

Barbary Films, Pathé

Production, France

2 Cinéma, Number 9

Films, C-Films, Film4

Production

Companies

A film by Paolo

Sorrentino

An Indigo Film

production in

collaboration with

Medusa Film

Co-produced with

Barbary Films,

Pathé, France 2

Cinéma, Number

9 Films, C-Films

in association with

Barilla G. e R. Fratelli

S.p.A. BNL Gruppo

BNP Paribas with the support of Eurimages with the contribution of Ministero dei Beni e delle attività Culturali e del Turismo, Direzione Generale per il Cinema with the support of Regione Lazio, Fondo Regionale per il Cinema e l'Audiovisivo, Regione Del Veneto, Fondo Regionale per il Cinema e l'Audiovisivo, Bundesamt für Kultur (Edi) Schweiz in association with Film4 with the participation

of Canal+ and Cine+ with the participation of France Télévisions in co-production with RSI - Radiotelevisione Svizzera/SGR SSR and Teleclub in collaboration with Mediaset Premium

Executive Producer

Viola Prestieri

Cast

Michael Caine

Fred Ballinger

Harvey Keitel

Mick Boyle

Rachel Weisz

Lena Ballinger

Paul Dano

Jimmy Tree

Mark Kozelek

himself
Robert Seethaler
Luca Moroder
Alex MacQueen
Queen's emissary
Luna Mijovic
masseuse
Tom Lipinski
screenwriter in love
Chloe Pirrie
girl screenwriter
Alex Beckett
bearded screenwriter
Nate Dern
funny screenwriter
Mark Gessner
shy screenwriter
Paloma Faith
herself
Ed Stoppard
Julian
Sonia Gessner
Melanie

Madalina Ghenea
Miss Universe
Jane Fonda
Brenda Morel

Dolby Atmos
In Colour and
Black & White
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Studiocanal Limited

Italian theatrical title
Youth La giovinezza

Present-day Switzerland. In an Alpine spa hotel, British composer Fred Ballinger and his old friend Mick Boyle, an American film director, watch the other guests and reminisce about the past. Fred has retired, and turns down a royal envoy who tells him that the Queen wants him to conduct a special performance of his most popular work, 'Simple Songs'. Mick is working with a team of screenwriters on what's planned to be his final film, 'Life's Last Day'. Fred's daughter Lena, who's been staying with him, leaves to join her husband Julian, Mick's son, for a Pacific holiday. A day later she returns in tears; Julian has left her for a younger woman. Julian shows up with his new love, the singer Paloma Faith.

Mick's five screenwriters argue endlessly about the script. Jimmy Tree, an actor preparing for a German

film, complains that he's only remembered for the movie in which he played a robot. He dresses up as Hitler and struts around the hotel, to the alarm of the other guests. The royal envoy returns but Fred again refuses his request. Lena berates Fred for his selfishness and mistreatment of her mother; she meets a shy mountaineer, Luca, who tells her that he can help her overcome her fear of heights. Brenda Morel, an ageing Hollywood diva whom Mick wants as the star of his film, arrives at the hotel only to dismiss his project contemptuously. After she leaves, Mick jumps to his death from Fred's balcony. Fred goes to Venice to visit his wife, who's senile. Luca takes Lena climbing. In London, Fred conducts his 'Simple Songs' before the Queen and a distinguished audience.

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Home cinema



Paranoid America: Ralph Meeker and Vera Miles in 'Revenge'

PERFECT MURDERS

Rehearsals for his movies perhaps – but Hitchcock's TV mini-thrillers are remarkable works in their own right

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS...

Alfred Hitchcock et al; USA 1955-62; Fabulous Films/Region 2 DVD; Certificate 12; 6,679 minutes; 1.33:1

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

Next to the outpouring of books and articles on every aspect of Hitchcock's films, his television work has been neglected; and when it has been looked at, it has often been through the prism of the films. In particular, the early seasons of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents...* have been treated as a kind of prolonged rehearsal for *Psycho* (1960), which was shot at TV speed on a TV-style budget and had a number of cast and crew members in common with the show – notably the director of photography John L. Russell.

This isn't altogether wrong-headed, and you can have a lot of fun, browsing all seven seasons, issued together for the first time on DVD, with the game of Spot the Psycho or Where's Norman? Take the celebrated 1958 episode 'Lamb to the

Slaughter', one of the ones Hitchcock directed himself, based on the Roald Dahl story about a woman who clubs her husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb. At the end, the unwitting detectives tuck into the roast the widow has kindly served up for them, wondering aloud what the murder weapon was, where it could be. The camera wanders into the next room, where Barbara Bel Geddes (the same year she pined for James Stewart in *Vertigo*) sits alone, apparently grieving. One of the cops bets that the weapon is still on the premises – maybe right under their noses: the frame narrows in on Bel Geddes as her weary expression gives way to giggles. It's hard not to see this as a foretaste of that final shot of Norman Bates, staring into the camera ("They'll say, 'Why, she wouldn't even harm a fly'").

But what rings the *Psycho* bell is often not the particulars – shots or characters – so much as the grey, grainy picture and the nervy atmosphere, the sense of paranoid America. The very first episode, 'Revenge' (1955), stars Vera Miles, who would go on to play Lila Crane in *Psycho* – though a more relevant reference is her performance as Henry Fonda's wife in *The Wrong Man* (1956), finally trapped by insanity. She and Ralph Meeker are newlyweds living in a trailer park by the

Pacific coast – he's got a job at an aircraft factory. When she is sexually assaulted by a stranger, and the police don't have enough information to go on, the couple wander into town, tracking a salesman to his hotel. This is a world of transients, where people travel a long way to find work, and civilisation can feel strained. It's the world of Marion Crane and her lover Sam; it's the world, too, of big cars and shiny new highways, like the one that left the Bateses out on a limb.

Still, this game can lead you astray. Looking at 'The Young One', from December 1957, in which rebellious, sexually precocious Jan (Carol Lynley) chafes at life with her prudish aunt, it would be easy to relate the atmosphere of repression, of adolescent sexuality warped into something vicious, to Norman: you can imagine him sitting in a corner of that roadhouse, staring longingly at Jan. And the staircase in her home – doesn't it remind you of the one

In the films, suspense is relieved by romance or comedy or violence. Here, in 20 minutes or so, the build-up can be relentless

Martin Balsam careered down after he'd been stabbed by 'Mrs Bates'? But even before the new highway was built, not all roads led to the Bates Motel: Hitch didn't direct this episode – it's one of two entrusted to a very young Robert Altman. He did approve the storylines, pitched to him by his producer Joan Harrison, so maybe some thought got triggered, or maybe some suggestion of Hitch's was being tried out; or maybe, like Scottie in *Vertigo*, I'm starting to see the object of my obsession everywhere I look.

And maybe it's worth thinking about *Alfred Hitchcock Presents...* as a remarkable production in its own right: 268 episodes over seven years, with some soft patches, some repetitions (watch too many at once and you might suffer a surfeit of premature burials and ironically delayed reprieves for prisoners on death row), but admirable consistency overall.

The scripts were mostly adaptations from magazine stories, a genre that barely exists now: solid crime writers such as Cornell Woolrich and Evan Hunter, twist-in-the-tail merchants like Dahl and Stanley Ellin, the odd swerve in the direction of SF courtesy of Ray Bradbury and John Wyndham. Occasionally the series dipped into the classics – a shame that the only time they tried Saki, whose macabre ironies seem tailor-made for Hitch's sensibilities, they took a lesser story, 'The Scharitz-Metterklume Method', and botched it.

The casting throws up astonishing juxtapositions of old and new Hollywood. In 'And So Died Riabouchinska' (1956, a variation on the theme of the ventriloquist's murderous dummy, directed by Robert Stevenson from a Bradbury story), a youthfully smooth-faced Charles Bronson is the detective investigating ageing Claude Rains; 'Man from the South' (1960, Hitchcock directing Dahl again) brings together Steve McQueen and Peter Lorre. Never again feel left out when your cool film-buff chums start playing Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. There are late performances by Robert Newton and Mary Astor and early appearances by Denholm Elliott and Robert Redford; actors cropping up multiple times include Walter Matthau and Hitchcock favourites Rains, Bel Geddes and John Williams (the detective in *Dial M for Murder* and the insurance man in *To Catch a Thief*). Personally, I'd nominate Tom Ewell for some sort of award for his twin impersonations of panic and urbanity in the creepy uptown doppelganger mystery 'The Case of Mr Pelham' (1955, directed by Hitchcock).

The roster of directors is less startling but still interesting, and interestingly full of actors: Paul Henreid, Ida Lupino, Don Taylor (the upper-crust Lieutenant Dunbar in *Stalag 17*, 1953) and Norman Lloyd (the villain in *Saboteur*, 1942); and while none of the other tyros had a career quite as distinguished as Altman's, the show did provide early gigs for Stuart (Cool Hand Luke) Rosenberg and Arthur Hiller (who was nevertheless undeterred from making *Love Story*).

What's clear from Hitchcock's own episodes is how brevity changes his approach to story: in the films, suspense is relieved by romance or comedy or violence; here, in 20 minutes or so, the build-up can be relentless, with only a commercial break



Lighter entertainment: 'Man from the South'

to save you. (Fabulous Films is also issuing the successor series *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*: it would be interesting to see whether the relentlessness is carried into the longer slot.) I found some of these short fictions hard to bear, in a way that the films rarely are – perhaps *Psycho* is the exception; perhaps TV taught Hitch something about cruelty. I wouldn't recommend taking more than two at bedtime; at that rate, these discs should last you months (and given the quantities to watch, the absence of extras doesn't feel like a problem).

Some of the Hitch episodes contain virtuosic touches – such as the inaudible marital row that opens 'One More Mile to Go' (1957), or the long frozen shots of a paralysed Joseph Cotten in 'Breakdown' (1955). The most sustained virtuosity, though, is in the monologues James Allardice wrote for Hitchcock to perform at the beginning and end of every episode. Hitchcock was already better known than most directors, but his poker-faced delivery of these weekly minor masterpieces of black comic absurdism made him a star. Sometimes he stands alone, hands folded in front of his belly; sometimes he is in an elaborate set – a cliff-top signposted 'Lover's Leap' – or has props and elements of costume: a pith helmet and witch-doctor to pursue an extended gag about the jungles of darkest Hollywood; a Holmesian deerstalker and meerschaum pipe from which bubbles spew out.

Sometimes the jokes are straightforwardly morbid – he pulls a noose out of a pile of bric-a-brac: "I don't know why I keep this. It's no good any more. It's been used." Sometimes there's an element of social critique. The noose is followed by a gun: "This is for the man who has everything. It's to enable you to take some of it away from him." (Bold stuff at a time when the Hollywood blacklist was still operating.) Mostly, he makes gags about the commercial breaks – sarcastic rhapsodies about the wonders of the sponsor's products and the beauty of the filmmaking, fearful remarks about the sponsor's reaction.

Perhaps the big thing that television did for Hitchcock was to teach him to despise advertising. Three years into making the TV series, he directed *North by Northwest*, in which Cary Grant's character, Roger O. Thornhill, is a slippery, amoral adman. Coincidence? Yeah, and Norman Bates was just a boy who loved his mother. ☹

New releases

AAAAAAAH!

Steve Oram; UK 2015; Icon Home Entertainment/Region B Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD; 79 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: audio commentary, 'Carolla Cooks', 'PUB!', 'The Cast Speaks'

Reviewed by Ryan Gilbey

As titles go, *AAAAAAAH!* sounds too soothing to suit the abrasive film to which it is attached. (Perhaps *Aaarrghhh!* was rejected on account of its evocation of piracy.) But viewers won't have to wait more than a few seconds to get the measure of this feature written, directed and edited by the actor Steve Oram, previously best known as one of the stars and co-writers of Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* (2012).

For this behind-the-camera debut, Oram has gone for rough-hewn, in both form and content. The handheld 4:3 cinematography by Matthew Wick (also making his debut) has an amateurishness that signals instability even before two men in the opening scene begin communicating with one another in simian cries and yelps. No English is heard in the course of the movie, but some actions speak louder than words: placing a framed photograph of a bride on the forest floor and then urinating on it is unlikely to denote esteem or affection; a woman biting off the penis of the man she is felling sends a message that requires no translation.

The narrative is also plain enough without words or names to help us along (all characters remain nameless until the end credits). One man (Oram) makes a bid to usurp the alpha male (Julian Rhind-Tutt) of another family; the woman (Toyah Willcox) had earlier been stolen by the alpha male from her previous mate (Julian Barratt) during a vicious challenge over a malfunctioning washing machine. A flashback shows the fatal moment of weakness: the plumber progresses from unblocking the pipes to having sex with the woman and then beating her husband senseless while the washing machine completes its cycle noisily in the background.

For all its superficial surrealism, the world of *AAAAAAAH!* is recognisably our own (the film was shot in and around the streets and parks of south London) but with



Grunt work: *AAAAAAAH!*

New releases

several crucial differences. There is no communication as we understand it, only pre-verbal grunting. Behaviour has not evolved far along the Darwinian scale. People defecate on the kitchen floor, though they at least have the forethought to put down cellophane first. And while technology is up to speed, with computer games and televisions staple parts of life, the content that appears on it is coarse and unsophisticated: the host of a cookery programme has her breasts hanging over her apron; the console for a motorcycle videogame is a pair of giant handlebars, the sort of hipsterish indulgence parodied in *Nathan Barley*.

Then again, retro is the order of the day. It isn't only that the film feels self-consciously 'cult', as if it were the winning entry in a competition to make a 1970s-style midnight movie. (The charge could be levelled at most of Wheatley's work.) There is also the loopy prog score by Robert Fripp of King Crimson, which seems ready-made for inclusion in the Trunk Records catalogue. (Fripp, who happens to be married to Willcox, donated the use of one of his unreleased albums to the movie.) The conceit of savagery flourishing unchecked in civilised society has obvious forebears in *Themroc* (1973), *Max mon amour* (1986), *Sitcom* (1998) and *The Idiots* (1998).

Though there is a 2001-style low-angle shot of one character triumphantly brandishing a trophy after an act of violence, Oram refrains from allusions to that film's monolith in a scene involving the unwrapping of a widescreen TV. The strength of *Aaaaaaaah!* lies in the tension between the strange and the quotidian. Its docu-style immersion in the real world – oblivious members of the public stroll past as Oram carries a severed limb into the local convenience store – is integral to this, even as it introduces inconsistencies. If there is no language, who wrote the copy for the adverts in the street? Why is there crockery but no cutlery? How do the houses stay so clean if meat is routinely tenderised against doors, food flung willy-nilly in the living room?

The points about the close proximity of the civilised and the primitive are so straightforward that it sometimes seems doubtful that *Aaaaaaaah!* has enough material to sustain it. Pure unsettling oddness wins the day, however. It isn't the orchestrated shock-value scenes – a man ejaculating on a photograph of Prince Harry – that stay with you so much as the unplanned, humdrum details: the cyclist in the far distance completing a circuit of the park, oblivious to the man in the foreground having his arm wrenched from its socket.

Disc: An audio commentary by Steve Oram, plus *Carolla Cooks*, a 10-minute version of the cooking show seen at the beginning of the film, and *PUB!*, the full version of the sitcom that the characters are watching at the end of the film.

ALL MY GOOD COUNTRYMEN

Vojtech Jasný; Czechoslovakia 1968; Second Run/Region O DVD; 115 minutes; Certificate 12; 1.37:1; Features: short film ('Bohemian Rhapsody'), booklet

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

Placed a strong third in a localised equivalent of a *Sight & Sound* critics' poll and one of just four Czech films officially 'banned forever' as a

by-product of post-1968 'normalisation', Vojtech Jasný's feature has quite a reputation to live up to, considering that it's been comparatively neglected internationally. This may partly be because Jasný was from an older generation than Jirí Menzel and Milos Forman, but also possibly thanks to a much more explicit engagement with Czech political history than many of his compatriots had been inclined to attempt. Length aside, this portrait of 13 years (1945–58) in the life of a small Czech village is broadly equivalent to Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (1984) in its chronicling of ordinary lives against an often distant backdrop of extraordinary times, in this case the coming of communism, Stalinism and compulsory collectivisation and the human toll that they end up exacting.

But from the start, *All My Good Countrymen* sidesteps dry polemic. Jasný is constantly alert to small human details, and the film frequently dissolves into whirling rhapsodies of music, dance, flowers and feathers. Although the films are stylistically very different, there are constant reminders that cinematographer Jaroslav Kucera was also the virtuoso who shot Vera Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), especially in his use of colour (which comes across much more vividly in this new restoration than in previous faded copies).

In his invaluable booklet essay, *S&S* contributor Peter Hames confirms that Alexander Dovzhenko was a major influence on Jasný and Kucera's use of landscape, with particularly strong echoes of 1930's *Earth* (unsurprisingly, given the similar subject matter). They also consciously echo socialist-realist iconography of heroic workers while implicitly demonstrating that such imagery is meaningless without the adoption of genuine socialist values. Instead, the workers have to deal with the venality and corruption that accompany all dramatic power shifts, and it's the folk-art daubs, with their angels and devils, that seem to depict reality far more convincingly. Though based on Jasný's original screenplay, it's as dense and enthralling as an epic novel.

Disc: Sourced from the Czech National Film Archive's 4K restoration, the image is expectedly pristine. Made shortly after the main feature, the wordless short *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1969) is a beautiful paean to Czech rural life that was also banned by paranoid apparatchiks who interpreted several of its images (fire, close-ups of mournful-looking faces, a concluding funeral procession) as being politically symbolic.



State of the union: *The Angry Silence*

THE ANGRY SILENCE

Guy Green; UK 1960; StudioCanal/Region B Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD; Certificate PG; 95 minutes; 1.66:1; Features: interviews with Michael Craig and Nanette Newman, trailer

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

The poster campaign's claim that this is "The frankest, most daring film ever made in Britain!" proves a tad hyperbolic, yet this drama of industrial relations deserves some credit for showing well-known British actors Richard Attenborough, Michael Craig and Bryan Forbes swapping their usual diet of war pictures and middle-class comedies for something with actual contemporary relevance. Craig came up with the story, Forbes the shooting script and Attenborough in producer mode drummed up the cash, but it was to be another 1960 title about a factory-floor rebel – Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* – that would gain a place in the ongoing critical hierarchy. Reisz's is certainly the more groundbreaking item, and Guy Green's movie has rather suffered for lacking the same New Wave credentials – and doubtless also for its critically unfashionable right-leaning politics.

The central thrust is that Attenborough, a machine operator at an Ipswich engineering works, doesn't support an unofficial wildcat strike, carries on working to support his family and faces psychological warfare (and worse) as a result. It's clearly intended as a defence of individual choice, but dramatically this is achieved by presenting the unions as a bunch of scheming, self-interested bullies whose tacit collusion with knife-wielding Teddy boys plays out like some hysterical masochistic fantasy of the rightwing tabloids. This strand is not at all subtle, and it weakens the film, which is at its best when watching the reliably terrific Attenborough sweat under the strain, though it also provides a surprisingly strong outing for Hollywood starlet Pier Angeli as his ferociously protective Italian wife.

While not quite a British *On the Waterfront*, it does generate potent sympathy for thoroughly decent Dickie's plight, and remains a fascinating example of a British film grappling with a hot-button issue of the day.

Disc: A crisp, pristine restoration, and the interview extras are worthwhile too, offering contrasting viewpoints as actor Michael Craig maintains that the film was essentially true to his original outline, while Nanette Newman points up the screenwriting contribution of her late husband Bryan Forbes.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

D.W. Griffith; USA 1915; BFI/Region B Blu-ray; Certificate 15; 191 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: archive films ('The Greatest Mother of Them All: Kate Bruce' (1920), 'The Coward' (1911), 'The Rose of Kentucky' (1911), 'Stolen Glory' (1912), 'The Drummer of the 8th' (1913), 'The Rebel Yell' (1932), outtakes, introduction, discussion, stills gallery, booklet

Reviewed by Pamela Hutchinson

No getting away from it, the Ku Klux Klan are the heroes of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Whether lynching a black man, intimidating African-American voters or dispersing mobs, the KKK are presented as saviours of the South and Lillian Gish's honour both. The film was after all adapted from Thomas

RISE OF THE FOOTSOLDIER

Fukasaku Kinji's brawling saga of gang warfare on the streets of Hiroshima is crowded with characters and chaos

BATTLES WITHOUT HONOUR AND HUMANITY

BATTLES WITHOUT HONOUR AND HUMANITY/ HIROSHIMA DEATH MATCH/PROXY WAR/POLICE TACTICS/FINAL EPISODE/THE COMPLETE SAGA

Fukasaku Kinji; Japan 1973-80; Arrow Films/Region A and B Blu-ray; 99/100/102/101/98/224 minutes; 2.35:1; Features: audio commentary, original trailers, interview featurettes, 152-page hardback booklet

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

The existing English-language discussions of Fukasaku Kinji's *Battles Without Honour and Humanity* films have tended to rely on finding familiar western analogues for the series. The director, according to Patrick Macias's *Tokyoscope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*, is "a Japanese Sam Peckinpah", while the epic *Battles* films have been called the yakuza equivalent to *The Godfather* series. While such comparisons may be helpful in drawing attention to the works in question, they don't begin to cover what is uniquely radical about the *Battles* films, both in their formal qualities and approach to narrative.

There are certain constants in the five *Battles Without Honour and Humanity* pictures, which were released in Japanese theatres in 1973 and 1974 (the first four were adapted by screenwriter Kasahara Kazuo from a series of true-crime articles by Iiboshi Koichi) and edited in 1980 into the nearly four-hour omnibus that rounds out Arrow Films' six-disc boxed set. (The fifth film, *Final Episode*, while not without qualities of its own, feels distinctly like an afterthought.)

Watched end on end, the *Battles* movies tell a (mostly) chronological story of yakuza activity in western Japan, beginning in 1946, passing through a vicious gang war in Hiroshima and Kobe and ending at the start of the 1970s. The throughline in all of this is Sugawara Bunta's Hironi Shozo, who inadvertently backs into the yakuza lifestyle in the post-war chaos and rises to become a low-level boss, but is finally hampered in his ambitions by his adherence to certain codes of conduct that those around him have long ago abandoned.

Shozo isn't the protagonist of the *Battles Without Honour and Humanity* series in the manner that, say, Nakadai Tatsuya is in Kobayashi Masaki's *The Human Condition* (1959-61). In the second episode, *Hiroshima Death Match*, he is practically reduced to the status of a bit player, as the movie instead concentrates on the story of lovelorn killer Yamanaka Shoji (Kitaoji Kinya), another young man without prospects who finds himself sucked into the yakuza lifestyle only to be ground up in the mechanisms of internal politicking – a figure that will reappear time and again with different



It's a battlefield: *Battles Without Honour and Humanity*

faces throughout the series. The *Battles* films are true ensemble pieces, in which the characters jockey for position and mugging extras elbow for screen time, and it's a form that suits the milieu they portray: this is a world of small-timers who all think they're marquee names.

The movies bristle with a legion cast of characters who crowd into the widescreen frame, and throughout the series Fukasaku pelts the viewer with blinding blizzards of information. I have made my way through the films twice now, and I am not at all sure that I could manage a passing grade on a multiple-choice test on the who, where, why and how of what happens. (Arrow's package is well trimmed with special features but a family tree of some sort would have been appreciated.) Characters are introduced in blink-and-you-miss-it freeze-frames providing often useless names, ranks and clans. The names and freeze-frames are repeated, along with a date, only after the same characters have experienced the final contortions of death, for curtain-call crime-scene photo stills. (There are exceptions to this rule: the expiry of a young working-class recruit in *Proxy War*, for instance, is followed by an almost grotesquely tragic funeral scene.)

Death is never proud in these films, while combat, far from a balletic meeting of two cool-headed opponents, is a confused, panicked mêlée of reckless gunfire, wildly swung *katana* and flung furniture. The Arrow package includes an interview with

Far from a balletic meeting of opponents, combat is a confused mêlée of gunfire, wildly swung katana and flung furniture

fight master Ueno Ryuzo, who explains the reasoning behind the chaos: "Real yakuza fighting is very messy. It's just a wild brawl."

The narrative architectonics of the series seem similarly haphazard. The first four films build up rivalries between Shozo and his craven ally in internecine warfare Uchimoto (Kato Takeshi), his buffoonish former boss Yamamori (Kaneko Nobuo) and Yamamori's capable chief lieutenant Takeda (Akira Kobayashi), who is something like Shozo's opposite number – a point made explicit in the melancholy prologue of the fourth episode, *Police Tactics*.

After the table has been set for a big, dramatically satisfying showdown, all the principals will be thrown in the jug for minor infractions, leaving the feud to peter out in a series of senseless street fights. (The Japanese police crackdown on yakuza activity, it would appear, was not so far in tactics from Robert Kennedy's contemporary strong-arming of the Cosa Nostra in the US.) Bosses convene in smoky backrooms, mahjong parlours and nightclubs, over tables strewn with empty bottles, to discuss what is to be done, quibbling over points of order concerning 'sworn brotherhood' alliances and 'saving face', very rarely resulting in decisive action. This is left to the young men, the footsoldiers, who wipe one another out in flash-fire eruptions of violence, occasionally working up the nerve to take aim at one of the higher-ups in the hope of cementing their reputations and fortunes.

Rather than a dramatic shortcoming, all of this constitutes a coherent idea of the arbitrary, ignoble reality of the yakuza lifestyle. Fukasaku is as much the Robert Altman of the yakuza film as the Peckinpah, dispensing with the rules of the well-made thriller – and in the process, creating a new standard. **S**

LOVE AND REBELLION

Yoshida Kiju kept his distance from the rest of the Japanese New Wave – but his films mark the movement's apogee

KIJU YOSHIDA: LOVE + ANARCHISM

**EROS + MASSACRE/COUP D'ETAT/
HEROIC PURGATORY**

Japan 1969/70/73; Arrow Academy/Region Free Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD Dual Format; Certificate 15; 220/169/110/118 minutes; 2.35:1 & 1.33:1; Features: 'Yoshida... or: The Explosion of the Story' documentary on 'Eros + Massacre', introductions to 'Heroic Purgatory' and 'Coups d'état' by Yoshida Kiju, newly filmed discussions of 'Eros + Massacre'; 'Heroic Purgatory' and 'Coups d'état' by David Desser, scene-select commentaries by Desser, theatrical trailers, illustrated book

Reviewed by Jasper Sharp

The name Yoshida Kiju (alternatively Yoshida Yoshishige) is not an overly familiar one outside Japan. When mentioned, it is usually alongside the better-known Oshima Nagisa and Shinoda Masahiro as one of the three filmmakers fast-tracked at the end of the 1950s by their company Shochiku into making their directing debuts while still in their twenties. They were branded the 'Shochiku Nouvelle Vague' (*nuberu bagu*), and their early promotion saw the studio attempting to court a post-war generation resistant to the old-school dramas of established in-house directors such as Ozu Yasujiro and Kinoshita Keisuke (under both of whom Yoshida served his apprenticeship) and marked the genesis of what has been subsequently termed the Japanese New Wave.

To what extent this New Wave was ever a cohesive movement is open to scrutiny. Certainly Yoshida never saw himself as a part of it. Interviewed by Alexander Jacoby and Rea Amit for the website *Midnight Eye* in 2010, he claimed to be barely on speaking terms with his two contemporaries, and had no connection whatsoever with directors such as Imamura Shohei, Hani Susumu or Wakamatsu Koji, who were seen as typifying the new auteur-driven cinema and who either hailed from other companies or had emerged entirely from outside the studio system.

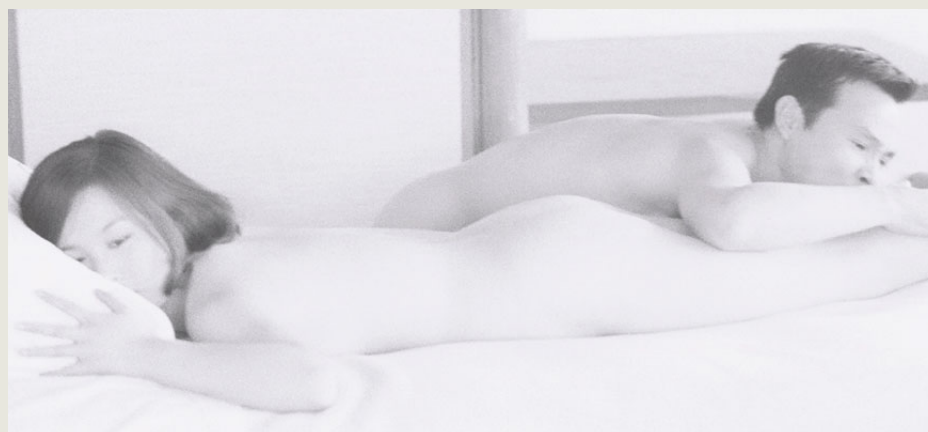
While all three of the original *nuberu bagu* left Shochiku to go independent, Yoshida states that his departure, after the studio recut the ending of his *Escape from Japan* (1964), was very different from Oshima's high-profile resignation following the withdrawal from circulation of *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960). Furthermore, while they all made films part-financed and distributed by that bastion of Japanese arthouse cinema in the 1960s, the Art Theatre Guild (ATG), Yoshida has refused to participate in recent international ATG retrospectives (including one held at the BFI in August 2011). Nevertheless, it is easy to view the loosely linked triptych contained in Arrow's

lovingly packaged *Love + Anarchism* box-set (the first English-language release of Yoshida's work, although he has been considerably better represented in France) as marking the apogee of this strain of socially engaged, historically interrogative and formally radical Japanese independent cinema of the late 1960s.

Eros + Massacre, Yoshida's 13th film and the sixth produced through Gendai Eigasha – the company he founded with his actress wife Okada Mariko, herself a major star – is probably his best known, if only through its title's appropriation by the American scholar David Desser for his 1988 book on the Japanese New Wave. At its heart is Osugi Sakae, the Taisho-era (1912-1926) anarchist and fervent advocate of revolutionary free love, and the three women in his life: his wife Hori Yasuko and his two mistresses, Kamichika Ichiko and Ito Noe, both associated with the pioneering feminist journal *Bluestocking*. Kamichika attempted to kill Osugi in a jealous rage in 1916; Ito, the journal's editor, was assassinated by the military police alongside him and his seven-year-old nephew in the chaotic aftermath of the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923.

Yoshida's film frames these historical events through the eyes of Eiko, a student in late-1960s Tokyo researching the incident, to counterpoint the ideological and emotional bankruptcy behind the new subversive political ideas and social mores of both eras. Past and present are intermingled in a non-linear and seemingly random fashion, drawing attention to the complexities inherent in interpreting historical events from a contemporary vantage point. The film opens with Eiko's on-camera interrogation of Noe and Osugi's daughter Mako (like Noe, played by Okada), while the ghosts from the past periodically intrude into contemporary settings in traditional

In style and content, these films bear the hallmarks of a bolder, more radical era of intellectually challenging cinema



Radical cheek: Okada Mariko and Hosokawa Toshiyuki in *Eros + Massacre*



Modern malaise: *Heroic Purgatory*


garb, with Osugi's assassination imagined on a busy highway in the middle of Tokyo.

Eros is presented in the monumental 220-minute version first released in France in 1969, and the 169-minute Japanese cut re-edited by Yoshida following legal action brought against him by the then 81-year-old Kamichika, just retired from a high-profile 15-year career in Japan's parliament. The case saw the domestic opening of this abridged version (in which Kamichika's name is changed to Itsuko Masaoka) delayed until March 1970.

It's a challenging work in either version, but repeated viewings are rewarded by cinematographer Hasegawa Motokichi's startling monochrome Scope contributions to Yoshida's aesthetic of refusing any single viewpoint ascribable to the dramatic agents. Characters are constrained in striking shallow-focus geometrical arrangements, exploiting both traditional and modern architectural features, with whole swathes of the top, bottom or sides of the frame blocked off or over-exposed, resulting in an unsettling, decentred use of space that wilfully rejects conventional framing and matching on action.

Heroic Purgatory is even more elliptical: its depiction of the uprisings by radical leftwing groups in protest at Japan's military relationship with America during the Cold War unfolds

New releases

 Dixon's *The Clansman*, and provides a romanticised version of the movement's origin story, creating a rush of publicity that the KKK capitalised on during its first release.

It's refreshing, then, on this new collector's-edition Blu-ray of the film from the BFI, to see Griffith's earlier take on the Klan. In 1911's *The Rose of Kentucky*, the 'night riders' are the enemy – a vicious gang assaulting a family home. Wilfred Lucas's upright plantation owner refuses to join their ranks, and when they attack his property he defends his household so stoutly that he wins the heart of the woman he loves, played brightly by Marion Sunshine. Still, it's a puzzle that in this film the clan are a faceless threat to Southern values, while four years later Griffith presents them as blessed white knights.

This two-disc set may not offer a neat answer to that puzzle (doubtless there isn't one), but its generous supply of extra material helps to place *Birth* in its natural landscape. The archive films here (beautifully scored by Stephen Horne) underline the fact that Griffith was not the only filmmaker at that time spinning tales of Civil War glory from the Confederate perspective – there are examples from Mack Sennett, Reginald Barker and Thomas Ince. A sound short from 1932 even has grey-haired veterans lining up to re-enact the famous rebel yell.

An audio snippet of Griffith on the radio in 1936 and his filmed introductions to the sound rerelease of *Birth* allow the director to offer his own explanations of the film – or at least of how his family's war stories inspired him. Meanwhile a filmed introduction from historian Melvyn Stokes and a round-table discussion called '*Birth of a Nation* at 100' bring in more critical questions and a sense of its poisonous legacy. Essays by Ashley Clark, Kevin Brownlow and Patrick Stanbury combine to give a rounded view of the film as troubling, brilliant, cruel and beautiful. **Disc:** Cushioned by so much supporting material, the main feature is in no danger of being mistaken for a straight-ahead action picture. But this gorgeous restoration of high-quality source material, tinted and accompanied by an updated version of Joseph Carl Breil's original roadshow score, is hard to resist. Especially in the first half of the film, this is seductive cinema, from the heart-in-mouth pace of Griffith's famous cross-editing to the legendary battle scenes and his mastery of detail in a teeming *mise en scène*. Returning to the film again after delving into the extras, one is abruptly reminded of why it is still so important, an astonishing landmark in our cultural history.

BOB ROBERTS

Tim Robbins; USA 1992; Fabulous Films/Region
2 DVD; 91 minutes; Certificate 15; 1.85:1

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

Tim Robbins wrote, directed and starred in this uneven but, a quarter of a century on, impressively prescient political satire. The title character is a folk-singing Republican senate candidate, an anti-Dylan (his albums include *The Times Are Changing Back*, one of his videos is a Robert Palmerish riff on 'Subterranean Homesick Blues') whose songs about complainers, shirkers and bleeding hearts harness white conservative resentments.

The film is a mockumentary on the *Spinal Tap* model – a crew follows Bob on the campaign trail, glimpsing now and then the control slipping, darker motives showing under his wholesome, easygoing veneer. It revolves around two fine central performances: Gore Vidal (!) as the patrician Democrat incumbent Brickley Paiste – decent but too weary and, as the name suggests, too stodgy to grasp Bob's game – and Robbins himself, all brilliantined hair and boyish grin, with an occasional glint of ice in his piggy eyes (he seems to understand better than most actors how his physiognomy works). Support includes a weirdly young Bob-worshipping Jack Black, Ray Wise as Bob's campaign manager, grin unwavering, and Alan Rickman deadpan behind tinted lenses as Bob's *éminence grise* – an ex-, or possibly not so ex-, spook with sinister Central American connections.

The conspiracy subplot is an irritation – too particular to have wide satirical application and faintly hysterical (Giancarlo Esposito's twitchy investigative reporter doesn't help). Perhaps not long after the Iran-Contra affair, with ex-CIA man George H.W. Bush in the White House, it seemed more pointed. Elsewhere, the script is unbelievably modern: a counterculture, outsidery pose reinforcing privilege, discussion of policy drowned out by culture-war sloganising, a message of 'aspiration' being used to persuade the poor to vote against their own interests – you heard it here first.

Disc: Clean transfer; no extras.

DANGEROUS GAME

Abel Ferrara; USA 1993; Olive Films/Region A
Blu-ray/Region 1 DVD; 108 minutes; 1.85:1

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

In 2013, Madonna, in an interview for *Harper's Bazaar*, opened up about her experience of being sexually assaulted at knifepoint on the roof of a downtown building in the late 1970s, shortly after her arrival in New York City. While this was treated as a revelation, it was familiar to anyone who had seen her denuding performance in Abel Ferrara's *Dangerous Game*, where she tells the story in the character of TV actress Sarah Jennings, though with the veracity of someone squirming in the grip of a vivid flashback.

Along with *The Blackout* (1997), *Dangerous Game* is compulsively confessional Catholic Ferrara's most explicit statement about his career-long preoccupation with the relationship between personal truth and the cinematic image, and the near-impossibility of trying to use the latter to pin down the former. Jennings is stretching her range in a long-drugged-night-of-the-soul chamber piece called *Mother of Mirrors* directed by one Eddie Israel (Harvey Keitel, fresh off Ferrara's 1992 *Bad Lieutenant*). Keitel's character is seen as relentless and browbeating in his pursuit of the real on set, though dissimulating in his home life, breaking from the LA shoot and customary philandering to return to his Brooklyn brownstone, young son and blinkered partner (played by Ferrara's own wife Nancy, a piece of casting that begs a *film-à-clef* reading.)


Ferrara's behind-the-scenes psychodrama might be taken as a rebuttal to 1991's *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, a tie-in to her

across the separate timeframes of 1952, 1968 and an imagined future of 1980, with no attempt to anchor the viewer in any of them. The conflicting group dynamics are played out against a stark backdrop of anonymous modernist buildings, with Hasegawa's bleached-out images and off-kilter compositions contributing to the sense of would-be insurrectionaries frozen impotently in a dehumanising limbo.

Coup d'état is undoubtedly the most straightforward of this trilogy, based on pivotal historical events whose repercussions on the modern state were keenly felt by Yoshida's generation. The drama centres on Kita Ikki (a dominating performance by veteran screen actor Mikuni Rentaro), a rightwing ideologue executed for his part in the notorious *ni-ni-roku* incident of 1936. This failed coup, aimed at overthrowing the government and restoring Emperor Hirohito to power (Kita was also linked to the earlier assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi on 15 May 1932), marked a turning point in Japan's militarism, resulting in the imposition of a state of martial law; it is featured obliquely in Suzuki Seijun's rambunctious *Fighting Elegy* (1966) and Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976). *Coup d'état* would have had contemporary relevance too, as it was released shortly after the novelist Mishima Yukio's infamous attempt at replaying the scenario in 1970, which ended with him committing *seppuku*.

Whether Yoshida identified with the label or not, *Coup d'état* is seen as a defining work of the Japanese New Wave. But it also marked its culmination, with ATG producer Kuzui Kinshiro resigning in 1974 because of financial problems with the company, and Yoshida himself remaining absent from the director's chair until 1986.

In style and content, all the films included in *Love + Anarchism* bear the hallmarks of a bolder, more radical era of intellectually challenging cinema. While they all demand from the viewer a strong level of engagement with Japan's political history, nevertheless their broader message about failed revolutionary ideologies is still of much contemporary relevance.

These films certainly need situating in some sort of context, which thankfully Arrow's release provides in abundance. It is Desser who contributes the lion's share of invaluable exegesis, with filmed introductions and scene-select commentaries for all the works. He also contributes to the illustrated booklet, with further essays by scholars Isolde Standish and Dick Stegewerns. Included from the 2008-09 French releases are the 30-minute documentary *Yoshida... or: The Explosion of the Story*, featuring Yoshida and critics Mathieu Capel and Jean Douchet, and video introductions by the director for *Heroic Purgatory* and *Coup d'état*, as well as theatrical trailers for those titles. Pristine HD transfers and uncompressed mono 1.0 PCM audio for the Blu-rays do full justice to the films' mesmerising imagery and soundscapes. 

New releases

➔ Blond Ambition world tour directed by an in-the-pocket camp follower, which projected the Material Girl in a manner calculated to flatter her self-image. It is to Madonna's credit that she not only accepted her director's challenge to stare into his camera-mirror but also abetted it – her Maverick Films produced *Dangerous Game*. (I prefer the European release title, *Snake Eyes*, which sounds at least slightly less like a junky erotic thriller.)

The shoot was apparently every bit as gruelling as that of *Mother of Mirrors*, and the starlet openly slandered the film after its release, while still seeming to understand that it contained her best work as an actress. Today it looks like a career best for all involved, a hoarse, hectoring cross-examination of the basic assumptions behind fiction and documentary filmmaking, with an influence that its anaemic opening-weekend grosses don't begin to tell.

Disc: It's a boon to have Ferrara's flaying masterwork available on disc, though it seems that the director's original cut will forever remain the province of bootleggers.

DRAGON INN

King Hu; Taiwan 1967; Eureka!/Masters of Cinema/Region B Blu-ray and Region 2 DVD Dual Format; 111 minutes; Certificate 12; 2.35:1 (DVD anamorphic); Features: newsreel, video essay by David Cairns, booklet with contributions from Tsui Hark, Tony Rayns and Edmond Wong

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

Along with his bookending *Come Drink with Me* (1965) and *A Touch of Zen* (1969), King Hu's *Dragon Inn* (aka *Dragon Gate Inn*) was one of the most important *wuxia pian* ("martial chivalry") films to emerge from the Chinese-speaking world prior to the great martial-arts boom of the turn of the 1970s. A massive local blockbuster both in its native Taiwan and in Hu's adopted Hong Kong, it's been regularly referenced and remade ever since, notably by Tsui Hark (producer of *New Dragon Gate Inn*, 1992, and director of *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*, 2011), while Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) is a wistful homage.

Alongside its cultural significance, *Dragon Inn* is also riotously entertaining. Familiar narrative archetypes (Ming-dynasty political intrigue, incognito evasions and assassination squads) and the equally recognisable location (a remote inn, which could just as easily be a surrogate for an American western saloon) play a very similar role to their US equivalents in Sergio Leone's films, although *Once upon a Time in the West*'s stately Claudia Cardinale offers no match for Lingfeng Shangguan's dazzling swordplay when it comes to female empowerment in a traditionally masculine genre. (Sexual politics are well to the fore: the chief villain is a eunuch, while Lingfeng's character spends much of the duration dressed as a boy, albeit as convincingly as her counterpart in a Shakespearean gender-bender.)

If the action scenes (aided by offscreen trampolines rather than the more familiar wires of later *wuxia* films) aren't quite as breath-catchingly dexterous as the ones Hong Kong cinema would later produce, they're both lively and agreeably frequent, with Hu using the Scope frame to its full compositional advantage. Ditto the Taiwan landscapes, which



Problem child: *The Reflecting Skin*

prove rather more varied than their somewhat restrictive Hong Kong equivalents and a wholly acceptable substitute for the lavish budgets that Hu had previously enjoyed at Shaw Brothers. If it's not quite first-rank Hu when set against *A Touch of Zen* or *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973), it makes for a superb introduction.

Disc: Based on the Chinese Taipei Film Archive's recent 4K restoration, this looks mightily impressive, and is clearly the definitive home edition. The big-gun Hu-related extras have been saved for Eureka's imminent release of *A Touch of Zen*, but there's a chatty video essay by David Cairns and plenty of booklet goodies.

A NEW LEAF

Elaine May; USA 1971; Masters of Cinema/Region B Blu-ray; 102 minutes; 1.78:1; Certificate U; Features: video essay by David Cairns, essay booklet

Reviewed by Kate Stables

Mike Nichols said of working with Elaine May that he took care of a sketch's shape and progression: "What she's interested in is character and the moment."

There's character aplenty in her blackly comic debut film (though presumably rather less than in the three-hour-plus version she famously initially presented to producer Robert Evans), amply expressed in quirky diversions such as broke playboy Walter Matthau's fierce Ferrari-love, or his dreamy, fondling farewells to the haunts of the New York rich. Comic moments are allowed to stretch themselves unhurriedly – the exquisite embarrassments of Matthau's grimly gold-digging courtship of May's wealthy but unworldly botany professor Henrietta (the ordeal of Mogen David Malaga wine spritzers, a Gordian knot of a nightgown) unfold at positively luxurious length. Subtler supporting characters such as William Redfield's gently vengeful banker and George Rose's philosophising valet provide sudden, unexpected pockets of pleasure around them. It's hard, however, to view the snippets of Matthau's murder fantasies (the skeletal remains of an excised subplot of a 'practice' killing) as a valuable addition.

Like May's even darker follow-up *The Heartbreak Kid*, the film sharply skewers the narcissism of a male hero bent on severing himself from a new bride. But May's portrayal of appealing, soft-voiced helplessness, set against Matthau's deadpan slow burn, is what humanises the film until its eventual change of tone feels credible rather than contrived.

Disc: A pleasant transfer renders the titular fern *Ascophyllis grahami* in an appropriately glorious green. David Cairns's video essay elegantly lauds Matthau's talents, and Glenn Kenny's booklet essay digs deep into the film's troubled history.

THE REFLECTING SKIN

Philip Ridley; UK 1990; Soda Pictures/Region B

Blu-ray; 96 minutes; Certificate 15; 1.37:1; Features: documentaries, short films, commentary, score track, stills and poster art galleries, trailers

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

If Terrence Malick and David Lynch had collaborated on a vampire movie, it might have come out something like *The Reflecting Skin* – though possibly not quite so disturbing. Philip Ridley's feature debut is set in a mythic American 50s Midwest, kicking off with the Norman Rockwell-ish image of a small boy running through a golden cornfield under a blue sky – then proceeds to undermine that reassuring start with exploding frogs, paedophilia, self-immolation, radiation sickness, an abandoned foetus, a black Cadillac full of baby-faced child-killers, and one of the most chilling juvenile performances ever committed to screen.

"The nightmare of childhood – and it only gets worse," announces Lindsay Duncan's pale, reclusive widow to young Seth Dove (Jeremy Cooper), who suspects her of being a vampire. Even worse, his admired older brother Cameron (Viggo Mortensen) returns from helping to blow up Pacific islands for the US nuclear programme and promptly falls for her. In this small rural community it seems that everyone is crazed with religion or drink or both, and Seth, with his innocent face and clear-eyed gaze, is possibly the craziest of all.

Influenced, according to Ridley, by *Alice in Wonderland* and the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, *Skin* is a *tour de force* of twisted gothic imagination, its deadpan horrors only enhanced by the stunning beauty of Dick Pope's photography.

Disc: The 2K Blu-ray transfer brings up Pope's visuals in all their glory. Soda has lavished the disc with additional riches: we get both of Ridley's previous shorts, *Visiting Mr Beak* and *The Universe of Dermot Finn*, along with his detailed commentary, a thorough 'making of' including interviews with Ridley, Pope, Mortensen and composer Nick Bicat, and a briefer featurette on Ridley's two subsequent features, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless*. And by way of a bonus, there's a signed photocard of Ridley's 1983 collage 'Fetal Blossom'.

ROBINSON CRUSOE ON MARS

Byron Haskin; USA 1964; Eureka!/Region B Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD; Certificate PG; 110 minutes; 2.35:1;

Features: audio commentary with Robert Skotak, trailer

Reviewed by Kim Newman

"This film is SCIENTIFICALLY AUTHENTIC," claims the poster, "it is only one step ahead of present reality!" Byron Haskin's rough translation of Daniel Defoe's novel to the space age is an obvious precursor to Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, as stranded astronaut Kit Draper (Paul Mantee) uses ingenuity to survive the hostile environment of the Red Planet – which is here assumed to have a nearly breathable atmosphere, sub-surface water

and exotic but edible flora (which can also be woven into handy ponchos, blankets and hats).

It's a mix of just-about-credible-for-1964 scientific extrapolation and the fancifully picturesque, an approach that also accounts for the melding of Death Valley location shooting with colourful sets and optical effects to create an alien world. In some respects, it's a more psychologically complicated film than *The Martian*, influenced by Luis Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe* (1954) in its depiction of the mental strain of isolation (Draper is haunted by visions of a dead comrade, played by a pre-Batman Adam West) as a threat even bigger than the hardscrabble of survival. There are even some credibly cynical touches, as Draper records a gung-ho account of his determination to endure but footnotes it with "That's for the morale officer."

In a Disneyish touch, Draper has Mona the Monkey to talk to for much of the film, though a late detour into pure pulp brings on an alien escaped slave (Victor Lundin) to fill the role of Man Friday; he's persecuted by extragalactic overseers in spacesuits and warships handed down from producer George Pal's earlier science-fiction films *Destination Moon* and *The War of the Worlds*.

Disc: The transfer is gorgeous, reproducing the unworldly Technicolor hues of Haskin's widescreen vistas – in which moving figures are often affectingly lost. The commentary by effects man Robert Skotak, an associate of screenwriter Ib Melchior, covers the whole of Melchior's career but devotes quite a bit of time to consideration of the film, which was originally intended as a low-budget effort on the lines of the Melchior-scripted *The Angry Red Planet*. Science-fiction writer Paul McAuley contributes an interesting essay to the booklet.

THIEVES' HIGHWAY

Jules Dassin; USA 1949; Arrow/Region B Blu-ray and Region 2 DVD Dual Format; 91 minutes; Certificate 12; 1.33:1; Features: documentary, video essay and commentary by Frank Krutnik, stills gallery, trailer, booklet

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

Thanks to the fame of *Rififi* (1955), Jules Dassin is often taken as French. But he was American-born, of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, and before he was hounded out of the US by the Red Scare merchants he directed near on a dozen Hollywood films. *Thieves' Highway* was the last of them, and one of the strongest.

Scripted (from his own novel) by A.I. Bezzerides, the film takes a gritty, deglamourised look at immigrant working-class life in California. Richard Conte is the Greek-American soldier, just discharged, who takes over his dad's trucking job to try to get justice for the old man, ripped off and left crippled by racketeer Lee J. Cobb.

In this hardscrabble world, money rules: scarcely a scene passes without cash value dominating the dialogue, and everyone's out for a fast buck at the expense of someone else. Even the cute hometown blonde Conte came home to marry proves to have dollar signs for eyeballs, and when he takes up instead with Valentina Cortese's world-weary hooker it's because her mercenary values are at least out in the open. The scenes between Cortese and Conte are startlingly sensual for the period; at one point she teasingly plays noughts-and-crosses with her nails on his naked chest. Sole serious letdown is the crassly studio-imposed ending, with two straight-arrow cops showing up to restore order.

Disc: Dassin's camerawork, all ominous low angles, high-contrast lighting and baleful overhead shots, gets a worthy transfer. An earlier

documentary, *The Long Haul of A.I. Bezzerides*, finds the then octogenarian screenwriter in fine foghorn voice, self-mythologising like mad. Frank Krutnik provides an informative intro and commentary, if you can get past his tiresome 'kind of, sort of, like, you know' delivery.

WALDEN/LOST LOST LOST

Jonas Mekas; USA 1969/76; Kino Lorber/All-region Blu-ray; 177/173 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: booklet essay by critic Ed Halter, audio commentaries by Jonas Mekas, Gideon Bachmann's film 'Jonas', Mekas's short films

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Lithuanian-born Jonas Mekas is a figure of almost unparalleled influence in New York film culture, the creator of influential journal *Film Culture*, original *Village Voice* critic, co-founder of Anthology Film Archives and a practising filmmaker, a role in which his theoretical and archival impulses coalesce.

Walden and *Lost Lost Lost* are two entries in Mekas's career-long project of autobiography through home movies, in which he celebrates and sings the worlds through which he moves – incidentally documenting them for posterity – defining his practice in voiceover tracks that display his understanding of his halting speaking voice's power as a rhythmic tool.

Walden is four years (1964-68) seen through the lens of Mekas's Bolex, in which the filmmaker-*flâneur* records dinners, weddings and four full cycles of the seasons seen from the Brakhage compound in the Rocky Mountains, the malevolent industrial badlands of North Jersey and the lunch counters of slush-pit-winter New York. The soundtrack alternates Chopin and subway clatter, and the cast offer a game of 'spot the counterculture personality' – the Velvet Underground at their inaugural show, and numberless other walk-ons and cutaways. In the three-hour torrent of footage, one encounters puzzling asides (the intertitle 'Black Power' introduces a black demolition crew at work) and beauty-flecked soporific drone.

Lost Lost Lost – like *Walden*, six reels coming in at near to three hours – looks back to a time before Mekas had situated himself in the heart of creative Manhattan, beginning with material shot in 1949, when he and his brother Adolfas had first arrived from abroad as *dipukai* (displaced persons) to settle in the ethnic Lithuanian enclave in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. One can watch the development of Mekas's corybantic camera style as the years pass – the material in *Lost Lost Lost* ends just before that in *Walden* begins, in 1963 – though the film's most astonishing footage comes through its privileged perspective on a tight-knit émigré community revolving around the Church of the Annunciation on Metropolitan Avenue, where they still read a Lithuanian Mass today. Mekas, that most ardent autobiographer, is often an obscure, transparent figure in his 'camera-eye' footage, hidden in plain sight, but when he announces his turning away from the Lithuanian past for an American future in *Lost Lost Lost*, the rueful heartbreak is unmistakable.

Disc: Commentary tracks offer Mekas's reminiscences from the frontline of the nascent counterculture, while the 16mm transfers of the 16mm material preserve grain, grain, grain! 🍷



A New Leaf Elaine May's blackly comic debut film sharply skewers the narcissism of a male hero bent on severing himself from a new bride

Lost and found

THE DYBBUK

OVERLOOKED FILMS CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE ON UK DVD OR BLU-RAY

A masterwork of fantastic cinema, *The Dybbuk* is a highlight of Yiddish-language filmmaking and a testament to a lost way of life

Reviewed by Daniel Bird

If your only encounter with Polish cinema was the recent touring programme of Polish classics, you would be forgiven for thinking that it began in 1945 and ended in 1989. This is unfortunate, in that it neglects Poland's particularly rich tradition of pre-war Yiddish cinema.

Beginning with Marek Arnsztyjn's *The Cruel Father* in 1911, Poland's Yiddish cinema (much like its theatre counterpart) brought both the exotic and fantastic to traditionally social themes, not least the problems of assimilation. Made in 1937, Michal Waszynski's *The Dybbuk* is a highlight of Yiddish-language film and deserves recognition as a masterwork of fantastic cinema. The film tells the tale of a young bride (Lili Liliana) who on the eve of her wedding is possessed by an aggrieved spirit.

Based on S. Ansky's 1905 play of the same name, *The Dybbuk* draws on traditions in Eastern European Jewish folklore and German expressionism. It features remarkable cinematography courtesy of Albert Wywerka, and it's no surprise to discover that, early on in his career, Waszynski served as FW. Murnau's assistant during his apprenticeship in Germany. The drama was the result of a series of expeditions, the purpose of which was to document, for posterity, shtetl life.

Originally intended to be produced by the celebrated Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, Ansky's play was first staged by Warsaw's famed Vilna Troupe. Inevitably, both Ansky's drama and Waszynski's film acquired a new resonance in the wake of the Holocaust. Like the photography of Roman Vishniac, Waszynski's *The Dybbuk* now stands as a unique record of a vanished world.

Although the film of *The Dybbuk* provides a prologue implied but absent from the play, it is not only faithful to Ansky's drama but also reflects the stark, tonal shifts between each of the four acts. Joachim Neugroschel, who re-translated *The Dybbuk* for playwright Tony Kushner, notes how Ansky's play begins as a melodrama and then turns into a musical before shifting to a ghost story and ending with what is, essentially, a courtroom scene.

The highlight of Waszynski's film is the second-act musical number, an expressionist *tour de force* which blends the darker moments of Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948) with Andrzej Wajda's phantasmagoric *The Wedding* (1972).

Although *The Dybbuk* was partly filmed on location in the picturesque Polish town of



Wedding belle: Lili Liliana as the young bride in *The Dybbuk*

A second-act musical number blends the darker moments of 'The Red Shoes' with Wajda's phantasmagoric 'The Wedding'

Kazimierz Dolny, shooting mostly took place in Warsaw's Falanga Studios, the hub of Poland's pre-war Yiddish-language cinema. However, arguably the most surprising aspect of the film is its homoeroticism, particularly during the opening prologue added by Waszynski.

Dybbuks, or aggrieved wandering spirits, have played roles in such diverse films as the Coen brothers' typically idiosyncratic *A Serious Man* (2009) and Ole Bornedal's more straightforward exorcism horror *The Possession*

(2012). In Poland, Marcin Wrona recently turned to dybbuk mythology in his *Demon* (2015), a horror-cum-satire that sets out to address the aftermath of post-war Polish-Jewish relations in a manner very different to Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013). Whereas Wrona conjures up a menacing atmosphere typical of modern horror (complete with Penderecki score), Waszynski's film, true to Ansky's play, is more about doomed love and metaphysics.

Waszynski remains one of the most colourful characters in Polish cinema. Born Michal Waks into a Jewish family in 1904, he converted to Catholicism and his name was Polishised to Waszynski. He was, according to a number of sources, gay. Easily the most prolific Polish filmmaker of the 1930s, during the war he turned to theatre before filming the battle of Monte Cassino. After the war, he worked in Spain and Italy as a producer on several Hollywood pictures, including *El Cid* (1961) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), before his premature death in 1965.

While the original film elements for *The Dybbuk* were destroyed during World War II, in the late 1980s the film in its original two-hour running time was patched together from various nitrate archive prints, including a reportedly pristine but incomplete copy from the BFI National Archive. Following the 1991 publication of *Bridge of Light*, J. Hoberman's overview of Yiddish cinema, there have been a number of publications that have thrown light on both Waszynski and *The Dybbuk*, most notably Samuel Blumenfeld's biography of the director and a monograph on the film by Daria Mazur. In recent years, Warsaw's Filмотека Narodowa has made available restored copies of a number of Waszynski's Polish films of the 1930s, including *The Dybbuk*. Nevertheless, a good-quality edition of *The Dybbuk* on home video is long overdue. **S**

WHAT THE PAPERS SAID



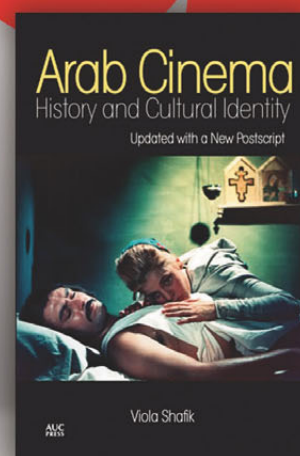
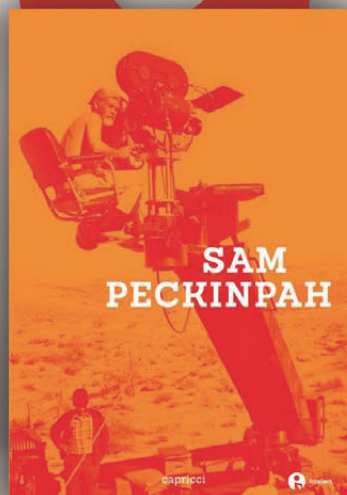
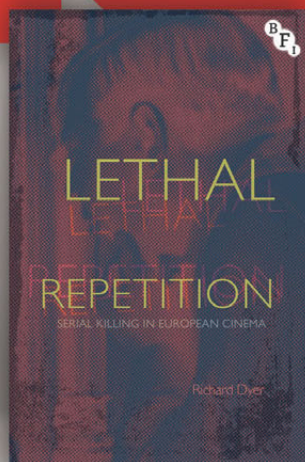
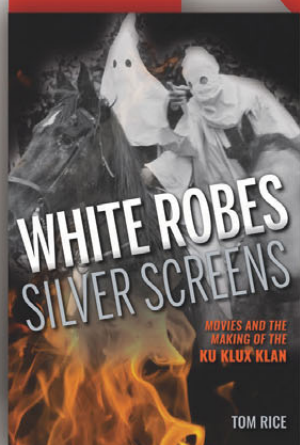
'As rich and strange an artefact as any aficionado of fantastic cinema could hope for. It overflows with esoteric rituals, customs and superstitions, some of which seem unfamiliar even to the characters on screen'

Mark Stafford 'Electric Sheep', 2011

'Contains various supernatural and folkloric elements that are roughly analogous to magical realism – though a more precise genre description would be Hasidic grotesque or Hasidic gothic.'

Jonathan Rosenbaum 'Chicago Reader', 2000

Read



WHITE ROBES, SILVER SCREENS

Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan

By Tom Rice, Indiana University Press, 328pp, paperback, illustrated, £18.99, ISBN 9780253018434
 "Quickly moving us beyond everything we knew about D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, Tom Rice's *White Robes, Silver Screens* is a brilliant exposé that unveils the complex, rich and disturbing history of the modern Klan, its extensive appropriations of motion pictures for political purposes, its attacks on Hollywood, and Hollywood's own multi-faceted responses to this powerful force of reaction. A fresh and compelling perspective on American cinema from the release of Griffith's blockbuster to the Second World War."
 – Charles Musser, Yale University
www.iupress.indiana.edu

LETHAL REPETITION

Serial Killing in European Cinema

By Richard Dyer, BFI/Palgrave, 256pp, paperback, £18.99, ISBN 9781844573936
 Shifting the focus away from the US, which is often seen as the home of the serial killer, *Lethal Repetition* instead examines serial killing in European culture and cinema – ranging from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean and from Britain to Romania. Spanning all types of cinema – including avant-garde, art, mainstream and trash – Dyer explores what this marginal and uncommon crime is being made to mean on European screens.
www.palgrave.com/page/bfi-publishing

SAM PECKINPAH

Edited by Fernando Ganzo, Intellect/

Capricci, 196pp, paperback, illustrated, £25, ISBN 9781783206193
 Director Sam Peckinpah (1925-84) never won an Oscar. His filmography is short and uneven, and his movies have never found a wide audience. Despite this, many filmmakers today, including Tarantino and Scorsese, count him as a major influence. *Sam Peckinpah*, edited by Fernando Ganzo, investigates how this unique filmmaker can have such an outsized legacy, exploring films as diverse as *New Mexico* (aka *The Deadly Companions*) and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, as well as Peckinpah's television work. This lavishly illustrated volume will delight scholars and fans, as well as bringing the under-appreciated Peckinpah to new audiences in a new millennium.
www.intellectbooks.com

ARAB CINEMA

History and Cultural Identity

By Viola Shafik, I.B. Tauris, 320pp, paperback, £16.99, ISBN 9789774166907
 Since it was first published in 1998, this book has become indispensable for scholars of film and the contemporary Middle East. Combining detailed narrative history with thought-provoking analysis, *Arab Cinema* provides a comprehensive overview of the subject. It analyses the ambiguous relationship with commercial Western cinema, and the effect of Egyptian market dominance in the region. Tracing the influence of local and regional artforms and modes of thought, both classical and popular, Shafik shows how indigenous and external factors combine in a dynamic process of 'cultural repackaging'. This revised edition has an afterword highlighting the latest developments in popular and arthouse filmmaking, with a special focus on Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and the Gulf States, and introduces readers to some of the most compelling cinematic works of recent decades.
www.ibtauris.com

Books



Striking a chord: Sophie Mayer explores feminist cinema across the globe, including the work of Amma Asante (above right, on the set of *Belle*) in the UK

WAYS OF SEEING

POLITICAL ANIMALS

The New Feminist Cinema

By Sophie Mayer; I.B. Tauris; 272pp; £16.99, paperback, ISBN 9781784533724; £59.50, hardback, ISBN 9781784533717

Reviewed by B. Ruby Rich

With *Political Animals*, Sophie Mayer establishes herself as the leading voice of a new wave of feminist film. With a perspective that is at once global and local, historical and theoretical, analytic and celebratory, she never lets the reader forget what is at stake in representation. Mayer's reach is encyclopedic. She's able to stitch together the most mainstream and the most obscure works while using them to argue for the real contributions of female filmmakers across country and genre.

This is film scholarship as intervention, written in a breathless vernacular that can glance across the page with apparent flippancy, only to strike with laser precision when needed. Mayer makes for an interesting guide: a long-time writer on these issues (she first came to notice as a dedicated chronicler of Sally Potter's work), she is also active in the trenches as a curator and organiser, working in collaboration

with a range of women and genderqueer and trans* (her term) filmmakers and publics.

The volume will be a boon to a generation, recentring the field from the usual historical catchments, placing the global South in the middle of the frame, and shifting lenses throughout to create a new arena of discourse – a new way of seeing, in fact, to borrow from John Berger. One can only hope that Mayer can rescue the field of film studies too: never again should 'American Cinema' or 'European Cinema' show up in curricula. Instead, filmmakers from different spots on the map are linked through urgent needs and original visions, sparkling lines that leap from Kelly Reichardt in the US over to Céline Sciamma in France and on to Sophie Hyde in Australia and Haifaa Al-Mansour in Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, Mayer divides her study into chapters focused on thematic but often unexpected categories: lost girls, for instance, or costume dramas, ecofeminism or, my personal favourite, 'Girl 'Hood'. Often these are typologies that depart from established modes of categorisation by situating the films within their own fictional worlds. Devising terms and categories that break with customary cinematic classifications permits Mayer herself to break

with predictable critical assessments. Consider, for instance, the flourish that sums up her view of Carol Morley's *The Falling* (2014): "She creates a new kind of girl 'hood, a fragile night-time space that incorporates the transgenerational, the queer, the elemental, the spiritual and the performative, a displaced place in which she can become."

Morley is no incidental choice here: Mayer's attention to the most interesting UK feminist filmmakers is one of the book's signal contributions. Rescuing Britain from the also-ran status it has too often endured in the US/French cinematic sweepstakes while also arguing persuasively for its 'postnationalist' identity, Mayer creates wonderful intersections and legacies among a range of important filmmakers: Kim Longinotto, Gurinder Chadha, Penny Woolcock and Sally Potter (of course) alongside Lynne Ramsay, Amma Asante, Carol Morley, Clio Barnard, Andrea Arnold, even Samantha Morton.

Following Mayer's leads, it's easy to imagine that the UK today is in the grip of radical cinematic energies that were last seen in the early years of Channel 4. Hers is no data-based sociological study, though: when Mayer gets down to a detailed consideration of a film, such as Asante's *Belle*, Arnold's *Fish Tank* or Ramsay's *Morvern Callar*, the reader is led into

a deep appreciation of what these filmmakers are up to and just how much is being lost if their work is shelved behind the insistently ever-present Tarantino or Dolan or Noé or... (fill in your favourite male auteur with unbridled acclaim and ever-renewed financing).

As I read and reread *Political Animals*, I was reminded of a statement that the great Julie Christie made when I interviewed her some 30 years ago. Commenting on the striking absence of female directors and the difficulty of getting female-driven scripts made, Christie mused: "Maybe the men just cannot see what is being offered to them by women as very interesting." She was talking about filmmaking, but might just as well have addressed film criticism, which today is at least as male-dominated as it was in the 1980s.

Enter Mayer with her toolbox of terms, films and filmmakers newly envisioned. Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (2007) is lauded for "challenging viewers' expectations of a catharsis delivered via spectacular violence" as part of a corpus of films that seek to "undo the war waged upon our senses". She scolds those mainstream films

The reader is led into a deep appreciation of just how much is being lost if this work is shelved behind Tarantino, Dolan or Noé

that suck in the audience, perpetuating "thrall". In praise of filmmakers who are constructing a "counter-heritage cinema", she leaps without blinking from Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* (2009) to Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) to Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014), taking time out in the case of the last-named to note the 'I can't breathe' T-shirts that the director and cast wore to the opening in protest at police violence. Mayer is also good at enlisting allies, pointing readers for instance to the new Twitter hashtag #Filmherstory and pausing to praise anyone offering a "counterbalance to the ever-boring narrative of the biopic about a white guy who did something..."

Political Animals would be a noteworthy volume at any time, but with genius timing, it has arrived at the white-hot crest of a feminist political reemergence into the business of film. With new organisations (including Mayer's own gangs, the Club des Femmes and Raising Films) and with an investigation into discriminatory hiring practices in Hollywood finally underway by the no-joke Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, as well as the attacks on Cannes two years ago over its male-dominated line-up, and increasing attention to numbers and absences in other festivals and film-credit rollcalls, there is definitely a sense of no more business as usual. Mayer's smart vision of a crossgender transnational post-provincial cinema is just what the doctor ordered. After all, representation matters. As Mayer herself confesses: "The big screen is the place we yearn to be, despite it being the place we're so shoddily treated: it's 'no place like home'." 📖

A REAL AMERICAN CHARACTER

The Life of Walter Brennan

By Carl Rollyson, University Press of Mississippi, 304pp, \$35, ISBN 9781628460476

Reviewed by Edward Buscombe

Walter Brennan was always old. Following his start in pictures in the mid-1920s as an extra in dozens of films, many of them westerns, he eventually graduated to speaking roles, but never expanded his repertoire too far beyond the ageing rummy he plays so memorably in Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944). A decade earlier, Hawks had given him his first big break in *Barbary Coast* (1935), in which he was cast as Old Atrocity (he was only 40-odd at the time), a hustler in the San Francisco of the Gold Rush era. Hawks gave Brennan his head, encouraging him to develop the folksy manner of speaking and quizzical expressions that became his stock in trade. *To Have and Have Not* saw Brennan perfect the shambling walk that was also to become a trademark, so much so that by the time of *Rio Bravo* (1958), another Hawks picture, Brennan plays a character called Stumpy whose very name encapsulates his manner of walking. At times he seems to have adopted the walk in real life, so far had it become part of his persona.

There's no question that Brennan was a good actor. His performances are more than an assembly of tics and mannerisms. He proved able to play characters on both sides of the law, sometimes villainous, sometimes with a heart of gold, often situated on the border between good and bad. He's memorable as vicious Old Man Clanton (there's that defining adjective again) in John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and he won an Oscar for William Wyler's *The Westerner* (1940), in which he played the hanging judge Roy Bean, acting opposite Gary Cooper, whom he had known since they were both impoverished extras.

Unlike Cooper, Brennan never got the girl. His parts are sexless (his sentimental attachment to Lillie Langtry in *The Westerner* is an old man's sentimentality, not passion). And in fact it appears Brennan was something of a prude. He turned down a role in Ford's *Tobacco Road* (1941) because he thought the subject matter too racy. Working with Lana Turner in *Slightly Dangerous* (1943), he told the cameraman to keep the camera up high so as not to show too much of the actress's bust. He was fond of saying that he didn't like to work with anyone he couldn't bring home to dinner.

"To follow Brennan... is to learn all you need to know about Hollywood and its mythologizing of the American dream," Carl Rollyson writes. This is a large claim to make, and I'm not sure his book substantiates it. One has to wade through a

Brennan picked fights with cast members over their political views and became so extreme he called John Wayne a communist



Old boy: Walter Brennan

lot of tedious plot summaries of minor Brennan films to extract such insights as are offered. What does become clear is that Brennan was a proactive performer. He liked to offer suggestions, and those directors who used him best were the ones who allowed him to develop his routines. Hawks appears to have been his favourite director, and his performances in Hawks's films, such as those mentioned above and, of course, *Red River* (1947), are the most memorable.

One of the guilty pleasures in reading Hollywood biographies is the scandals they so often reveal. Disappointingly, Brennan has nothing of this kind to offer, shunning the bright lights of Hollywood and living quietly on his Oregon ranch with his wife of more than 50 years. However, even by the right-wing standards of many of the key figures of the western genre, Brennan was a real extremist, backing the House Un-American Activities Committee, actively supporting the ultra-conservative presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and picking fights with other cast members over their political views. Working on *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954), Brennan feuded with Spencer Tracy on account of Katharine Hepburn's attacks on Joseph McCarthy. Brennan's views became so extreme that he even called John Wayne a communist. Nor was he immune from Hollywood's casual anti-Semitism.

Whether there is an intimate connection between Brennan's social conformity and his political conservatism, and in turn between both tendencies and the ideology of the western genre itself, is a question well outside the scope of this biography. But one can't help feeling the book might have benefited from a wider perspective. For instance, Brennan was only one of several actors who specialised in the part of the garrulous and cantankerous old-timer. Some comparisons might have been illuminating. George 'Gabby' Hayes, Fuzzy Knight, Arthur Hunnicutt, Al St John, Smiley Burnette were all foils to the hero, leavening the drama with comedy in a way which became a staple of American cinema. 📖

ZOMBIES

A Cultural History

By Roger Luckhurst, Reaktion Books, 224pp, £16, ISBN 9781780235288

Reviewed by Anne Billson

"In the last fifteen years, the zombie has reached saturation point," writes Roger Luckhurst, and most horror fans would agree. Micro-budget cinema is rife with the rotting undead; *The Walking Dead* chomps through the TV ratings; advertising has co-opted the living dead to sell products; the media hails the zombie as a multi-purpose metaphor for everything that troubles present-day society, whether it's recession, contagion, immigration or terrorism. In short, zombies have shambled out of the genre shadows into the mainstream.

Luckhurst's cultural study traces the creature's mutation from the revived corpses of Caribbean lore into the flesh-eating ghouls we know and love today. The author gets off to a rocky start in the introduction when he cites the 2008 miniseries *Dead Set* as an imitator of *The Walking Dead*, which aired in 2010, but is on firmer ground once he starts digging into the zombie's fascinating origins. These can be found in the forcibly transplanted slave populations of the Caribbean, whose African religions were outlawed as seditious and driven underground, from where such beliefs "steadily acquired a monstrous and phantasmal status in 19th century travel writing".

It was in the interest of colonial powers to demonise Haiti, which since 1804 had held a unique position in the Caribbean as an independent republic. Thus it was repeatedly depicted as a hotbed of superstition, in lurid accounts spiced with hints of cannibalism and human sacrifice, all feeding into "the American view that Haiti cannot govern itself". Chroniclers of the exotic such as Lafcadio Hearn and William Seabrook titillated readers with rumours of zombie sightings; anti-colonial



Shop of horrors: George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)

intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon dismissed Vodou as a primitive symbol of subjugation, while the anthropological fieldwork of Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s, during which she saw dead men sit up at their own funerals, echoed the sensationalism of colonial vilification.

The zombie took its first shuffling steps into popular culture via 1920s and 30s pulp fiction. Its induction into the pantheon of cinema monsters began with Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), inspired by Seabrook's *The Magic Island*. Pausing to praise Jacques Tourneur's "extraordinary lyrical masterpiece" *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), Luckhurst dips into the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, *Pod People*, horror comics and, ultimately, the "massification" of zombies, in which the nature of the beast is transformed from the odd lurching bogeyman into faceless hordes, their numbers representing an implacable threat to the established order. Pivotal to this shift, of course, was George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which has triggered almost half a century of zombie apocalypse cinema.

Luckhurst is, quite rightly, respectful of Romero's zombie cycle, arguing that "*Land of the Dead* [2005] is not horror but a peculiar new form of social realism", but one can almost feel his distaste as he picks his way through the Italian splatterfests capitalising on the success of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). He rounds up the last 35 years in a rather hurried final chapter, as though exhausted by his earlier research, which is a pity, because his interesting ideas about global epidemics, body horror and "the normalisation of the zombie apocalypse" merit expansion. His observations about gaming (he is "repeatedly bitten to death" in the initial stages of *Resident Evil*) are very funny, though do little but dance over the surface of the recurring zombie motif in the games industry, and one would like to have read more of Luckhurst's thoughts on the zombie's continuing infiltration of non-horror genres such as romcoms and westerns, and its refashioning into a more sympathetic figure. But, like them or not, there's a lot of life in the undead yet, and this book is a useful primer. **S**

CHARTERS AND CALDICOTT

As War Begins

By Peter Storey, CreateSpace, 202pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781517778767

Reviewed by Nathalie Morris

Charters and Caldicott are one of the great British fictional comedy duos. Created by screenwriters Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, and played by Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne, these cricket-loving representatives of the British stiff-upper-lip brigade first appeared in supporting parts in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* in 1938. They were a huge hit with audiences and went on to feature in Carol Reed's *Night Train to Munich* (1940), before taking centre stage in *Crook's Tour* (1941). Radford and Wayne's fourth and final appearance as Charters and Caldicott returned them to smaller but still memorable roles in *Millions Like Us* (1943). "We must remember not to bathe here after the war," Caldicott muses in the film, as the pair, now part of the war effort, lay mines on a south coast beach. Disagreements with Launder and Gilliat over the size of their proposed roles in *I See a Dark Stranger* (1946) prevented Radford and Wayne playing Charters and Caldicott

again, but they appeared together as very similar characters in a host of other films, including *Dead of Night* (1945) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949).

Author Peter Storey (who also runs a website devoted to the duo) describes *Charters and Caldicott: As War Begins* as "a biography of two fictional characters". It is actually more of a retelling of the pair's first four films purely from the perspective of their characters. In some ways this recasting of the narrative structures of the films – particularly *The Lady Vanishes* and *Night Train to Munich* – is an enjoyable exercise, but the book's overall purpose remains somewhat bewildering. Storey writes with great affection for the characters and gently and humorously captures their idiosyncrasies and chemistry as a double act. While this is a wonderful reminder of the skill and wit of the actors and the screenwriters (and immediately made me want to rewatch the films), I was hoping for more: either a fictionalised biography of these lovable characters or some sort

Storey writes with great affection for the characters and gently captures their idiosyncrasies and chemistry as a double act



Charters and Caldicott in *Night Train to Munich*

of annotated version of their exploits, along the lines of William Baring-Gould's 1967 *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, putting things like cricket, the Phoney War and *Punch* magazine into context. In his introductory notes the author mentions his "desire to know more about the characters [...] what they did, where they went and also what became of them", as well as the "new and exciting bits of information" that his research has led to. Disappointingly, *Charters and Caldicott: As War Begins* does not really deliver on either front. **S**

TIME AND PLACE ARE NONSENSE

The Films of Seijun Suzuki

By Tom Vick, Freer Gallery of Art/
University of Washington Press, 242pp,
£20.99, ISBN 9780934686334

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Time and Place Are Nonsense, Tom Vick's new critical study of the Japanese director Suzuki Seijun and his go-for-broke filmography, takes its title and epigram from Suzuki's own estimation of his madcap work. Suzuki cut his teeth making genre quickies for the Nikkatsu Studios before being dismissed after 1967's "incomprehensible" pop-art yakuza thriller *Branded to Kill*, and during the period of his subsequent rediscovery, reappraisal and return to the set in the 1980s and 90s, he never seemed to be able to take himself as seriously as some of his new fans did. Vick's announced intention is to elevate Suzuki's reputation in spite of the sometimes flippant and dismissive manner in which the director spoke of his output. "Just as artworks sometimes need to be defended from their advocates," Vick writes in his final chapter, "sometimes artists have to be defended against themselves." (The advocates that Vick is wary of include the "vulgar auteurs", who he correctly diagnoses as fighting a battle against narratives of taste that have "already been fought and won", as well as the Westerners who are content to lump together all stylistic exuberance coming from the East as instances of extreme kamikaze lunacy rather than to examine them as works of conscious or subconscious artistry.)

Vick is the curator of film at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington DC, which originated the most recent touring retrospective of Suzuki's work, and under whose auspices *Time and Place Are Nonsense* was published. (It is the first English-language study since the Tony Rayns-edited *Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun* in the mid-90s.) The author's relationship to the Freer allows for the book's inclusion of several full-colour reproductions from the gallery's collection of Taisho-era *bijin-ga* (paintings of beautiful women) in discussing Suzuki's so-called Taisho Trilogy, named for the 1912-26 period in Japan which was distinguished by rapid modernisation and Westernisation.

The chapters on the Taisho Trilogy are among the book's strongest, for in standing up for the latter-day films that Suzuki made away from Nikkatsu and genre confines, Vick has his clearest opening to defend Suzuki as an artist, praised in this period for fulfilling Umberto Eco's definition of "open works". (1980's *Zigeunerweisen*, in particular, is an almost Lynchian labyrinth.) As for the Nikkatsu period, Vick mentions an early reader of the manuscript voicing concern that Suzuki is characterised as a "lone artist working among hacks", and it is true that the author doesn't spend any longer than necessary placing Suzuki alongside his contemporaries, save for a brief definition of the 'Nikkatsu action' genre. It would be helpful to have a fuller idea of what typical assembly line product consisted of before discussing the ways in which Suzuki subverted their tenets, though Vick offers valuable insights into the politics within Nikkatsu and



Shooting from the hip: Suzuki Seijun's *Detective Bureau 2-3: Go to Hell Bastards* (1963)

Tom Vick aims to elevate Suzuki's reputation in spite of the flippant manner in which the director sometimes spoke of his output

the manner in which Suzuki's creative team worked within the studio's confines, as well as some interesting information on the double-bill policy of the era in which Suzuki came up. (His films were more than once paired with 'A' budget works by Nikkatsu stablemate Imamura Shohei, which addressed similar subject matters in a more wilfully artistic style and tone.)

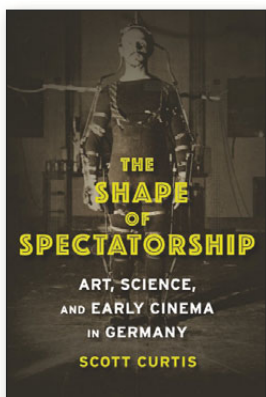
Vick's decision to set Suzuki apart from his fellow Nikkatsu genre grinders isn't accidental, for the author wants to place his subject within other contexts. First, he is portrayed as a man highly receptive to the changing society in which he was working – particularly the glass-

and-steel go-go Tokyo that emerged during the pre-1964 Olympiad cleanup. Second, Suzuki's output is located within the ferment of activity in the Japanese avant garde in the 1960s, when "art, popular culture, and radical politics were arcing toward each other in a number of ways". In particular, Vick dwells on the manner in which many of Suzuki's stylistic "enthusiasms", while undermining traditional narrative modes and accepted realist modes, would return attention to the one unmistakably real aspect of the cinematic illusion, the basic materiality of the film screen – an essentially modernist gesture. Also of interest are several passages of analysis in the book's longest chapter, a sort of critical biography dedicated to tracing the development of Suzuki's mature style through the Nikkatsu years, which examine Suzuki's complication of or outright disregard for the usual deployment of structures of visual symbolism, either based in colour or the passage of the seasons, the latter of which is discussed in a sizeable translated excerpt from an essay by Hasumi Shigehiko. (Some of the book's greatest insights originate with Hasumi, an enormously influential Japanese critic whose work has been little translated into English, including the observation that the "result of Suzuki's continuous investigation of the film medium is that he finds out more about its limits than its possibilities".)

Suzuki is still alive but, at 92, the retired filmmaker's poor health apparently precluded the possibility of his being interviewed for the book, and though Vick alludes to some exchanges via postcard, most of the direct statements from the notoriously elusive director seem to come from previous interviews. The trickster Suzuki may never cry "uncle!" and confess to being an artist, then, but Vick has assembled a significant body of evidence to plead the case. ☺



Suzuki's *Passport to Darkness* (1959)



The Shape of Spectatorship

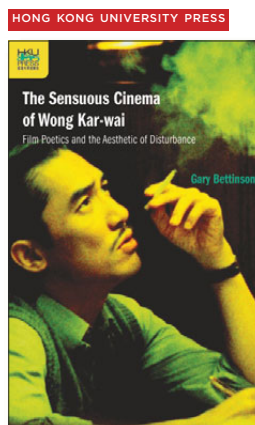
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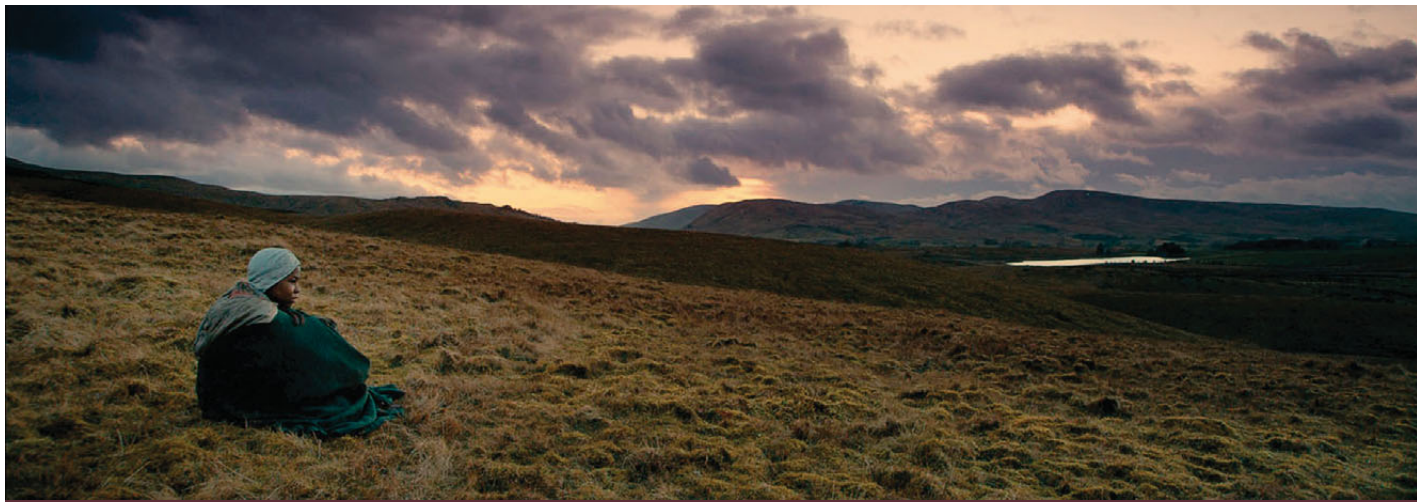
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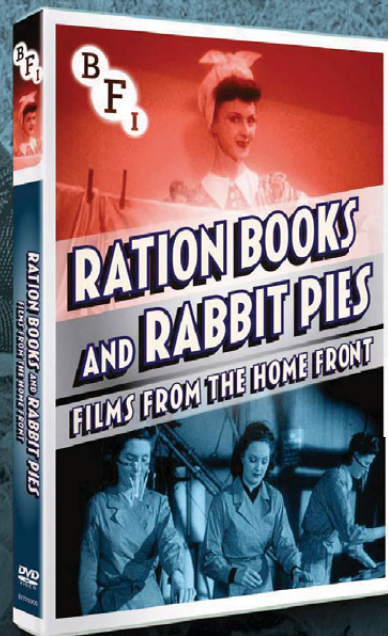
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HEROES AND VILLAINS

Graham Greene provides a brilliant explanation of Christopher Fowler's dissatisfaction with the endings of Hollywood films ('Dead ends', Letters, *S&S*, January). In a review of the 1930s Soviet film *Lenin in October* Greene argues that in focusing on single figures rather than scenes of mass action, it signals "the end of the Communist film. It is to be all 'Heroes and Hero-Worship now': the old films are to be remade for the new leaders: no more anonymous mothers will run in the van of the workers against the Winter Palace. The USSR is to produce Fascist films from now on." The idealisation of Schindler as a solitary heroic figure at the end of Spielberg's film is an exact embodiment of what Greene is talking about.

Grahame Smith *Stirling*

TIM IS OF THE ESSENCE

I am somewhat late coming to this discussion ('Acid Rayns', Letters, *S&S*, November 2015), but may I raise a grand 'hooray' for the services of Tim Lucas, whose audio commentaries are always erudite and entertaining – indeed they provide a major motivation for me to purchase Blu-rays/DVDs in the first place. Though one critic maybe Rayns on your parade, you get the thumbs-up from me.

William Barklam *by email*

HIGH PLAINS NANNY

Shane was clearly an influence on *The Searchers* ('Top gun', Home Cinema, *S&S*, January) but did it also influence *Mary Poppins*? In both films a mysterious stranger drifts into town (in Mary's case quite literally) helps a troubled family, then drifts off again...

Mark O'Kane *Newcastle*

NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

I was delighted to see Chabrol's *Alice or the Last Escapade* featured in *Lost and Found* (*S&S*, January), because Chabrol is now almost forgotten apart from a few masterpieces like *Le Boucher*. Perhaps that is the price of directing 54 full-length films for the cinema (plus television work), some of which seem to have been made just so he could eat in good on-location restaurants and keep his team in employment.

I have DVDs of all 54 films and all but one (*La Ligne de démarcation*, 1966) have either English subtitles or, in two cases, dubbing. As Craig Williams suggests in his article, such DVDs can be hard to source, not least because 13 of the 54 films never received a UK cinema release. But all of his films can be found – from French-speaking Canada with English subtitles, for example – so they need not be as 'lost' as one might think.

Graham Breeze *Ilkley*

BEARING A LIKENESS

Your recent article on *The Revenant* ('Call of the wild', *S&S*, January) fails to mention that it seems to be a remake of *Man in the Wilderness* (1971), in which Richard Harris was the

LETTER OF THE MONTH SIDE EFFECTS



While I always enjoy *Sight & Sound*, I have a principal frustration with the magazine: its refusal to engage with the visual effects industry. It has become a vastly important part of cinema. I'm not talking about dinosaurs or superheroes pirouetting across the screen – I'm talking about the CG exteriors, the set extensions, the colour grades, the things you don't even know are there.

Even the most experienced of directors will happily hand entire shots to effects teams. And these shots are led by people who intimately understand cinematic conventions, on top of the formidable intricacies of visual effects software.

As a result, visual effects artists are

increasingly moving into the director's chair. Gareth Edwards (*Monsters, Godzilla*), Tim Miller (*Deadpool*) and Wes Ball (*The Maze Runner*) began their careers in the sweaty workhouses of the numerous effects studios dotted around the globe.

You'll happily cover the illustrious careers of Roger Deakins and Thelma Schoonmaker, but not the upstarts of the visual effects industry, who will remain anonymous guiding hands of cinema unless you devote articles to them.

Given that so many of modern cinema's effects are made in London, it seems a shame *S&S* is so blasé about the industry. Ignore it at your peril.

Henry Winchester *by email*

survivor of a bear attack pursuing the party led by John Huston's Captain Henry. Directed by Richard C. Sarafian in Spain, its supporting cast included British actors Percy Herbert, Norman Rossington, Dennis Waterman and the alleged London gangster John Bindon, as well as James Doohan, better known as Scotty in *Star Trek*.

Nora Pate *by email*

JUMPING THE GUN

There is one way we can make cinema more central to cultural life, make it romantic again (Editorial, *S&S*, January), and simultaneously nudge younger audiences into more adventurous film habits ('The habit of art', Brewster, *S&S*, January) – by making the experience of cinema as a culture (as opposed to individual events) more immediate, collective and relevant.

One obstacle to this is demonstrated by your 'Best Films of 2015' feature (*S&S*, January), in which it is clear that the critical environment is divorced from the audience. Contributors to *S&S* generally see films at international festivals six to 12 months ahead of a UK general release (if that ever arrives). If you live outside London, it may take up to three months before the film reaches your local cinema, and in

many cases you have no option but wait for the DVD release further down the line.

The fact that five of the top 10 films in the poll hadn't received a release at press time means 99 per cent of your audience won't have seen them. In an engaged cultural environment, a poll like this should spark debate and encourage comparison by readers, as the magazine's decennial 'Greatest Films of All Time' poll does. Instead, it is at best a wish-list for readers, and at worst a frustrating "I go to film festivals" club.

One way or another, we need to help audiences share in the critical excitement surrounding a film, and consequently around the experience of cinema generally. Getting films to market quicker (whether that involves multi-platform releases or not) and focusing more attention on the film when audiences can engage with it, rather than way in advance, seem critical to this.

Mike Ashcroft *by email*

Additions and corrections

January p.74 *All About Them*, 15, 86m 34s; p.77 *By the Sea*, 15, 122m 13s; p.79 *Christmas with the Coopers*, 12A, 106m 55s; p.80 *The Danish Girl*, 15, 119m 35s; p.86 *The Lesson*, 15, 111m 10s; p.87 *Peggy Guggenheim Art Addict*, 15, 95m 33s; p.90 *The Show of Shows*, 12A, 76m 22s; p.92 *Sparks and Embers*, 15, 88m 16s
October 2015 p.85 *Infini* Not submitted for theatrical classification, Video certificate: 15, Running time: 106m 12s

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY



The gunshots fired at the audience by the bandit in Edwin S. Porter's 1903 short are an act of violence that shatters the fourth wall

By Pamela Hutchinson

Jean-Luc Godard felt filmmakers should be free to rearrange the beginning, middle and end of their scenarios. In 1903, Edwin S. Porter left it to the projectionist. Scene 14 of his *The Great Train Robbery*, according to the sales catalogue, "can be used either to begin the subject or to end it, as the operator may choose".

The Great Train Robbery is one of cinema's earliest westerns, and something of a breakthrough in the development of narrative film editing. Porter's ten-minute movie cuts between simultaneous action in different locations, more economically than in his previous work *Life of an American Fireman* (1902), and the drama gains urgency from its use of location shooting, camera movement and frequent eruptions of violence. It is based on a true story from 1900, when Butch Cassidy's Hole in the Wall gang hijacked a train on the Union Pacific Railroad. The outlaws steal the mail and rob the passengers, exploding a safe and killing three men in the process. In real life the Hole in the Wall Gang evaded capture that day, but in Porter's film a posse of locals pursue the bandits on horseback, track them to a hideout in the woods and kill them in a shootout.

In scene 14, actor Justus D. Barnes, who plays a member of the film's bandit crew, faces the camera square-on, draws his revolver and fires six times in the direction of audience. With the gun's chamber empty, he continues to squeeze

the trigger, suggesting carelessness, desperation or an overzealous kill impulse. His impassive face suggests the last option is correct. The intended effect, according to the catalogue, which is what we have in lieu of a screenplay, is that Barnes is firing "point-blank at each individual in the audience". It's an especially violent act, both in real terms, and cinematic ones. The narrative momentum of the film is cast aside, then the fourth wall of the screen is broken by his gaze, only to be further ruptured by his bullets. Placed at the opening of the film, it might act as a trailer for the shoot-'em-up action to come. As a coda, it's a warning to the audience that it's a wild world out there, and the violence continues even after the train robber case has been closed.

That's perhaps why the version of the film that has been handed down to us places Barnes at the end, a jolt of terror as disconcerting as a hand bursting from a grave. Martin Scorsese borrowed the shot for the ending of *Goodfellas* (1990), submerging a trigger-happy Joe Pesci into Ray Liotta's farewell to "the life". In that film, the bullets can be read as an assassination threat (Liotta's Harry Hill has rattled out his fellow wise guys to the FBI) or a guilty conscience, troubling the protagonist with memories of past deeds. But just as in Porter's film, Scorsese is addressing the audience, not the internal logic of the film. With these gunshots, *Goodfellas* acknowledges its place in the history of the cinema's glamorisation of violence, a process that comes full circle when

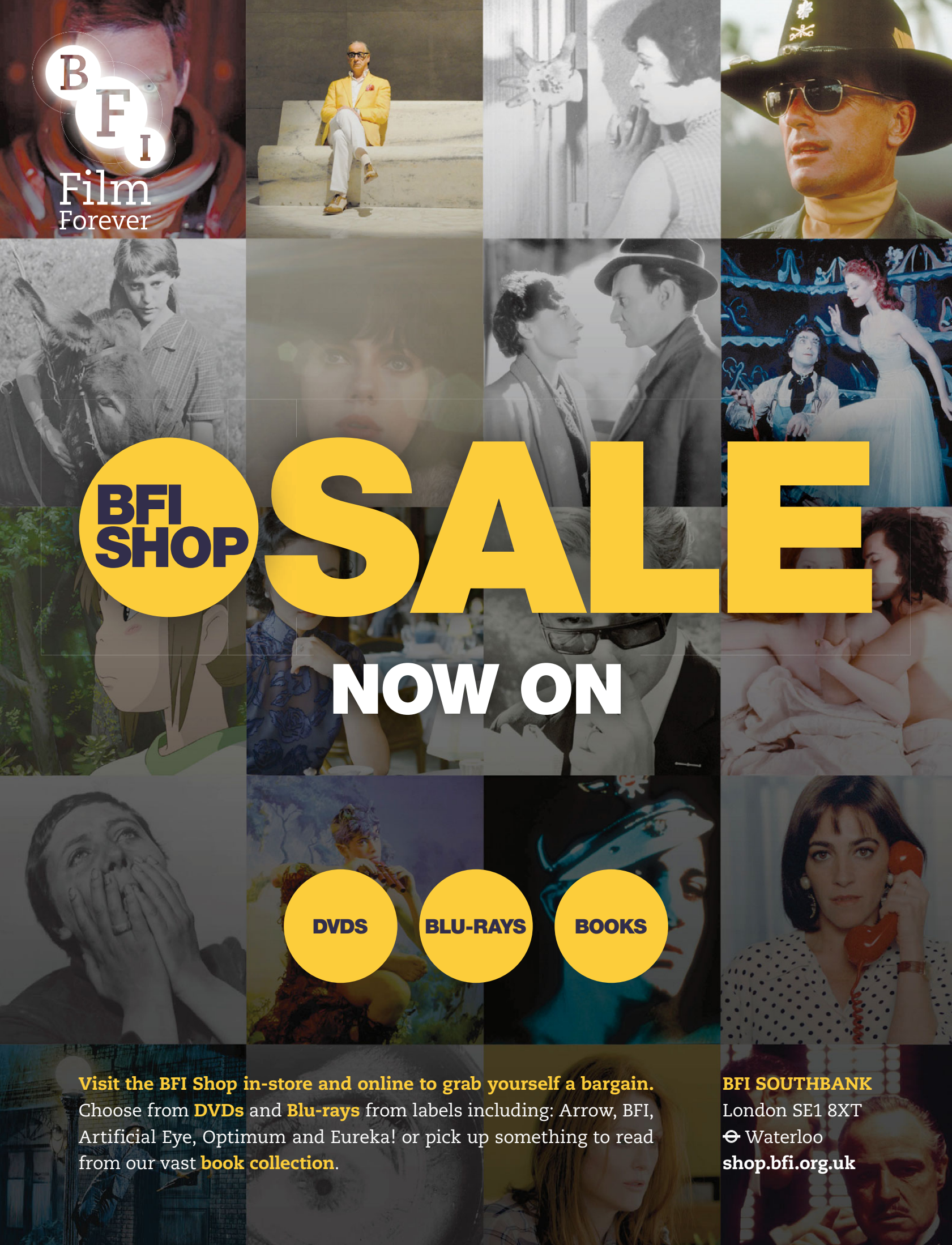
The scene is a warning that it's a wild world out there, and the violence continues even after the train robber case has been closed

Hill's closing monologue states that gangsters were "treated like movie stars with muscle".

But what does scene 14 do for *The Great Train Robbery*? Porter is serving his audience the thrill of screen violence two ways. The portrait of Barnes in character (perhaps a reference to a Wanted poster) is a remnant of the Cinema of Attractions, but within a narrative film. In order to contain all the action in the frame of a mostly fixed camera, *The Great Train Robbery* relies on long shots, often with the outlaws' backs to the camera, so we can see their crimes as they commit them. Scene 14 adds spectacle to the storytelling, and character too. That sales catalogue bills it as a "life-size picture", but on even the scantiest Nickelodeon screen, it would be far bigger than that. It gives us a long cool look at one of the outlaws before he fires, and then reveals his face again and again as the smoke from each gunshot disperses.

There's another moment of spectacle in the film, a saloon scene in which the Wyoming locals perform a conventional group dance, and then a flashy 'tenderfoot' routine, with 'Broncho Billy' Anderson picking up his toes to avoid gunfire (there's a nod to this in *Goodfellas* also, when Pesci's character yells, "I'm the Oklahoma Kid!" and shoots at Spider's feet). The dance sequence serves as an introduction to the good guys who will chase the robbers down; a messenger interrupts the jig to share the news of the robbery.

If you compare these two pauses in the narrative pace of *The Great Train Robbery*, logic would dictate that scene 14 should open the film, by way of announcing the gang. But in this early film, the trailblazer for so many westerns to come, narrative sense comes second to the thrill of action. The posse may have defeated the bandits, but as Barnes keeps firing the myth of the outlaw endures. **S**



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